TANG JIU QING

BALLAD of SWORD & WINE 5

QIANG JIN JIU

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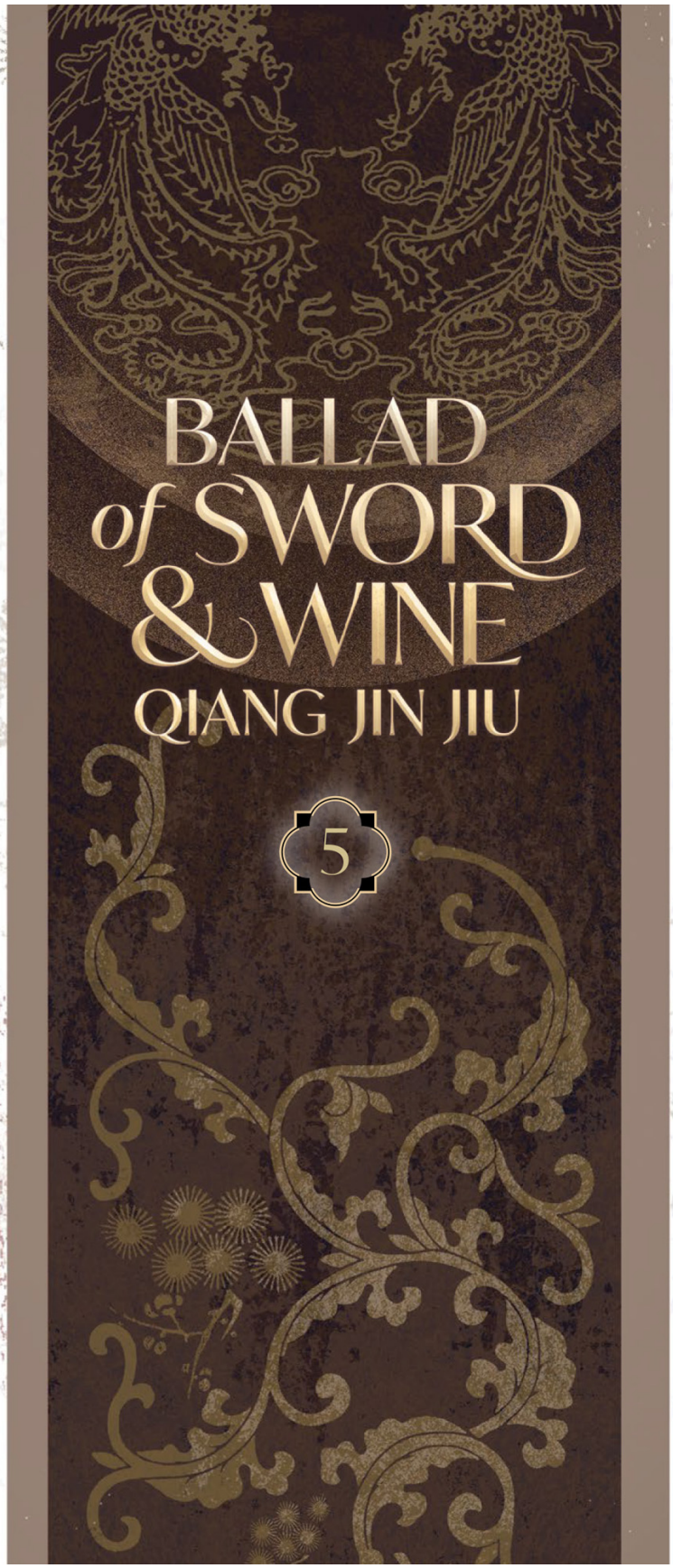
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Chapter 147:
Stepmother

THE MORNING AFTER their company rescued Yao Wenyu, Shen Zechuan was up before dawn. He draped a white, wide-sleeved outer robe over his shoulders to guard against the chill as he stood at the desk looking over Yao Wenyu's prescription.

"His body was ravaged by the poison." Teapot in hand, Qiao Tianya poured a cup for Shen Zechuan. "It's astonishing he's still alive."

Shen Zechuan picked up the teacup. "Given Xue Xiuzhuo's usual methods, he would have aimed to kill." His brows drew together. "Is there no hope for his legs?"

"No." Qiao Tianya put the lid on the pot.

Shen Zechuan couldn't bring himself to drink the tea; he placed the untouched cup back on the table. "What about his health? Now that he's here, spare no expense; get him whatever medicine the physician prescribes. And assign a few meticulous attendants to care for him. We mustn't be poor hosts."

Seeing Qiao Tianya silent, Shen Zechuan understood: Yao Wenyu's health would never be recovered. While they had been conversing the previous night, Yao Wenyu had repeatedly coughed bloody spittle. Shen Zechuan paused before asking, "Is he awake? I'll pay him a visit."

When Shen Zechuan arrived, he saw the maidservants waiting in attendance under the eaves, as petrified as cicadas in winter. He lifted the bamboo blinds to enter, his expression placid. The lamps were unlit, and the dimness lent the interior an air of bleak gloom. It was quiet and still within. Shen Zechuan caught only a vague glimpse of Yao Wenyu's lonely back through the screen.

Seeming to sense his presence, Yao Wenyu glanced over his shoulder. "Vice Commander, please come in." `

Shen Zechuan lifted the hanging screen and ducked inside. Qiao Tianya waited in the outer chamber, leaning against the wall as he listened to the chirps of the caged birds hanging over the veranda.

“Cizhou will enter autumn soon, and the matter of trade with Huaizhou has been on Your Excellency’s mind of late.”

Despite his severe illness and paralyzed legs, Yao Wenyu was unwilling to appear sloppy before anyone and had dressed impeccably. Only the bruises on his hands remained conspicuous, no matter how he tried to hide them.

Shen Zechuan appeared not to notice. “The matter is indeed worrying. There are disadvantages to approaching them about the purchase of grain both too early and too late. I’ve been discussing it with Lord Zhou for days, but we’ve yet to reach a conclusion.”

Yao Wenyu gave a slight nod. “There are two difficulties with regard to Huaizhou. The first is Jiang Qingshan, and the second is the checkpoint at Luoxia Pass. Without resolving both, it will be hard to establish a trade route between Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou. But if you ask me, neither of these pose too great a challenge.”

Shen Zechuan listened with rapt attention.

Outside, the birds were chirping. Yao Wenyu looked at the new gauze screens on the window and coughed a few times. When he had caught his breath, he said, “When Xue Xiuzhuo held the post of Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, he made the acquaintance of Jiang Qingshan. The two have worked together for many years; they not only made up for the deficit in Juexi’s taxes but turned the thirteen cities of Juexi into Great Zhou’s granary. Only when Jiang Qingshan is in personal command in Juexi can he ensure the integrity of Juexi’s governance and prevent another major incident like the case of Libei’s tainted grain earlier this year. In other words, Jiang Qingshan must not leave Juexi. Xue Xiuzhuo will no doubt transfer him back to his original post so he can continue to serve as Provincial Administration Commissioner. The vice commander needn’t worry he will be sent north to Huaizhou.”

During his years as Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, Xue Xiuzhuo had enacted many practical policies to help people in the outlying provinces. He was well-acquainted with the political situation in all the various regions—this was why, during the reign of Xiande, he was able to work with Hai Liangyi to audit Hua Siqian's accounts. Likewise, although Yao Wenyu had never served in government, he had wandered the land all year long. Having observed every province for himself, he too was aware of political concerns across the empire. Despite their differences in identity and status, both men were more intimately acquainted with the plight of commoners than officials like Kong Qiu and Cen Yu, who resided in Qudu year-round.

"Regarding Luoxia Pass." Yao Wenyu turned back to Shen Zechuan. "Libei has broken free of Qudu's control. The garrison at Luoxia Pass is the predecessor of the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the troops stationed there are all former subordinates of the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu. They have long been at odds with Qudu despite their appearance of unity. As it stands, Zhongbo's revival will be nothing but advantageous to Libei. Luoxia Pass should be all too eager to lend a helping hand; I doubt they'll deliberately obstruct you."

Yao Wenyu paused to cough again. Shen Zechuan handed him a cup of tea, and Yao Wenyu thanked him before continuing. "If you want a deal with Huaizhou, it's yours. Mister Chengfeng and Lord Yu's presence will be enough. I believe the most crucial matter at hand is not the north, but Zhongbo itself. The eastern prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou can be left for the moment, but Fanzhou must be secured with all haste."

Shen Zechuan and Yao Wenyu conversed until noon, when Fei Sheng came to deliver Yao Wenyu's medicine. As Shen Zechuan stepped out, he looked around at the maidservants lined up under the eaves. He turned to Qiao Tianya. "You haven't had much to do lately. Let Fei Sheng and Ding Tao stay with me, while you remain here and take care of Yuanzhuo."

Fei Sheng had initially thought this task would fall to him. Qiao Tianya was Shen Zechuan's indispensable, trusted subordinate, the leader of all his personal guards. He never expected Shen Zechuan to let go of him

this easily for the sake of Yao Wenyu. But from another angle, this merely illustrated Yao Wenyu's importance. With Qiao Tianya keeping watch, no one would dare neglect Yao Wenyu's care.

As for Shen Zechuan himself, he had a second layer of consideration.

Yao Wenyu was a proud man. Although his legs were broken, he was still a distinguished young master of Qudu, and refused to present a sorry sight to others. He hadn't called any of these maids to serve him this morning because he was unwilling to let them see him in his injured state. Fei Sheng was unsuited to care for him; his penchant for ingratiating himself with his superiors would be counter-productive here and make things awkward for all involved. In contrast, Qiao Tianya and Yao Wenyu shared a similar background. There were many things about Yao Wenyu only Qiao Tianya could truly understand.

Qiao Tianya murmured his acknowledgment and stayed.

Regardless of Yao Wenyu's pronouncements, any deal with Huaizhou would have to be discussed in detail with Zhou Gui. Shen Zechuan spent the next few days in the prefect's study. Given his acclaimed reputation, Zhou Gui's advisors all hoped to catch a glimpse of the famous Yao Wenyu. But Shen Zechuan declined all their visitation cards—the man had yet to recover from his injuries.

When Xiao Chiye received the letter informing him of Yao Wenyu's condition, he immediately turned to call for Wu Ziyu. When the young general arrived, Xiao Chiye instructed him to send a military craftsman to Cizhou to design a custom four-wheeled vehicle for the scholar.

Wu Ziyu had been with Xiao Chiye for a month. His troops had gradually bonded with the Imperial Army over their misfit status and now got along better with them than anyone else. Since the soldiers of the other camps all looked down on them, they didn't waste their breath sucking up to the fighting battalions. Each time the supply squad delivered provisions, the receiving camp would check them. Once everything was confirmed in good order, they retraced their steps to their station at Border Camp, where they stayed put to avoid conflicts with the other camps.

“What kind of four-wheeled vehicle?” Wu Ziyu, still bare-chested from his ablutions, trailed behind Xiao Chiye. “For military sieges, transporting supplies, or…?”

Tantai Hu socked Wu Ziyu on the shoulder and scolded with a laugh, “Did he ask for you or a craftsman? Master has given his orders; just do it!”

“I’ve got to at least get the details clear so I can prepare materials before they head out,” Wu Ziyu retorted.

The military craftsmen of Libei were renowned for their skill. Their workmanship was known to be excellent, and all the materials they used came straight from the Hongyan Mountains; they wouldn’t care to source anything in Zhongbo.

“For moving about.” Xiao Chiye had just dismounted and was filthy from head to toe. They’d been on the road for six days returning from the front lines; everyone was exhausted.

Wu Ziyu turned back to relay the command, while Chen Yang followed Xiao Chiye into the tent with the rest of his personal guards. The tables and chairs that had originally occupied the tent had been removed, replaced with a newly constructed sand table. Gu Jin was waiting when they arrived.

“Gu Jin.” Xiao Chiye shrugged off his outer robe and tossed it to Chen Yang. He propped both elbows on the edge of the sand table, eyes already on the lay of the land. “Report.”

Gu Jin pulled off his helmet, his face drenched in sweat. He pointed to Tudalung Banner. “When we brought the provisions up this time, I made a special trip around Tudalung Banner with our cavalry. It’s just as you suspected—Huhelu was redeployed to the southeast to make way for someone else. The commander stationed up north now is a man named Hassen. According to Wu Ziyu’s information, Hassen is Amur’s son, from the Hanma tribe. At the start of spring this year, the Biansha Horsemen attacked Third Sand Camp. Hassen led Amur’s vanguard against Zhao Hui in battle. The Three Great Battalions of Liuyang lost eight hundred men in that fight.”

Chen Yang pulled over a folding chair, and Xiao Chiye sat. “Those are heavy casualties.”

“Remarkably heavy.” Gu Jin pushed aside a strand of damp hair and continued. “This man is cunning and ruthless, but not reckless. When the heir was badly injured and Amur had him surrounded on all sides, Zhao Hui rushed over to provide reinforcement, only to end up trapped by Hassen on the plains. The entire squad was thrown into chaos.”

“That man is educated.” Wu Ziyu, slipping on his coat as he entered the tent, spoke up from the back. “In terms we would use, Hassen is Amur’s lawful son. While Amur has over ten sons, he only remembers a few of them. Of those, Hassen’s mother is the most distinguished; she’s known as the flower of the Hanma tribe. Amur’s control over the Hanma is in large part due to her influence. The status of the son depends on the status of his mother, and Hassen is the son who, by virtue of his mother’s status, was raised at Amur’s side and personally taught by the man himself. In the future, he will inherit Amur’s title of Great Hero. I’ve only heard this and never seen it myself, but apparently, he’s well-versed in the art of war; even Huhelu was afraid of him.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” Tantai Hu stroked the scar on his face. “If I’d known of his prowess, I would’ve stayed in Tudalung Banner and not returned.”

“You’d just be serving your head up on a platter.” Wu Ziyu came to a stop beside the sand table. After a moment of hesitation, he added, “His fighting style is actually pretty similar to our supreme commander’s.”

“Then he’s also ill-suited to be stationed on garrison duty.” Xiao Chiye set his thumb ring straight. “I bet he likes to provoke others into attacking, right?”

The various generals didn’t respond, silently musing that the second young master was rather self-aware.

Gu Jin coughed lightly. “Hassen wasn’t commanding the fight against Libei before this year. Until then, he’d mainly been stationed in the southeast, where he gave Qidong hell. Hassen was the one who injured Qi Shiyu and almost took his head off.”

It was him!

Tantai Hu gasped. “Then I’ve heard of this man too. Marshal Qi herself fought him back then. When Qi Shiyu was trapped on the east side of Biansha’s camps and couldn’t break through, his sons didn’t dare deploy troops for a rescue mission. Marshal Qi went to the Chijun, Bianjun, and Cejun Commanderies one after another to request reinforcements. Cejun vehemently refused; it was the Lu Clan of Bianjun who stepped forward to solicit assistance from Suotian Pass. The grand marshal gathered these three forces into an army strong enough to venture into enemy territory and rescued her father.”

That battle had propelled Qi Zhuyin to fame. She had taken advantage of the direction of the wind and burned ten li of the linked Biansha camps’ provisions; it was this that earned her the epithet Windstorm through the Scorching Plains. But the battle had not been an easy one. In truth, the legend that followed omitted part of the story—Hassen had hunted Qi Zhuyin for thousands of li after she had rescued Qi Shiyu; the return path of the Qidong garrison troops had been paved with blood.

Xiao Chiye’s eyes brightened slightly. “I see. In that case, I know him too.”

This man was Lu Guangbai’s archenemy.

“Three days ago, Zhao Hui led the Liuyang Camps up north to Tudalung Banner to take over Guo Weili’s post and face Hassen.” Xiao Chiye turned his thumb ring. “Right now, we no longer have any reinforcements backing us. Libei has only two major camps left in the southeast: Guo Weili’s Third Sand Camp, and ours. Even if it traveled at a snail’s pace, the news that we beat back Huhelu should have reached Amur’s ears by now. This is an opportunity. If he hasn’t altered his original plan, the Biansha Horsemen will launch an assault on Third Sand Camp before the middle of the eighth month at the latest. We need to kick Guo Weili in the ass as hard as we can to keep him awake.”

“Uh, hang on,” Wu Ziyu interjected, “Guo Weili won’t fall asleep. He gets overly excited—*that’s* his problem. He’s apt to get ahead of himself

and is easily provoked. If Hassen tricks him and leads him away from the camp to slaughter him, then what are we, a bunch of soldiers who move supplies around, supposed to do?”

Xiao Chiye, Gu Jin, and Tantai Hu turned their heads to him as one and said: “Fight.”

Wu Ziyu wiped spittle off his face. “We don’t have the authority to move without orders. And not to put a damper on everyone’s fighting spirit, but it was partially blind luck we won the battle at Third Sand Camp. Huhelu was another Guo Weili; he took our supreme commander’s bait and was defeated with the element of surprise. But now the Biansha soldiers know our strength; Amur won’t repeat his mistake. Their next attack will be an all-out assault—the kind they’ve been launching on the front lines. They’ll be fighting a genuine siege war, and we’ll no longer have the advantage.”

Xiao Chiye got right to the point: “That’s why, when you kick Guo Weili in the ass, you have to tighten the collar around his neck at the same time. If he dies, it has to be because he was strangled to death.”

No one was willing to deal with Guo Weili. They had nearly come to blows during the handover of Third Sand Camp. Chen Yang and Tantai Hu still held a grudge over the incident with Gu Jin, and Guo Weili didn’t give a damn about Xiao Chiye. But the fact was, it was dangerous to leave things like this. If the generals were not of one mind, accomplishing anything would be an uphill battle. Even if Xiao Chiye was a superhuman warrior, the strength of one man was meaningless in the face of thousands of soldiers and horses. What was more, their enemies weren’t fools; the old vulture in command was smart as a whip.

Tilting his head back, Xiao Chiye stared at the roof of the tent. *So damn annoying.*

Chen Yang, who had been quiet all this while, flipped open his notebook and said solemnly, “And now for a message Gongzi sent from Cizhou. He said—”

Xiao Chiye’s eyes darted over. “I’ll read it myself.”

“—that the marriage alliance between Hua and Qi will take place in three days.” Chen Yang paused, then continued, reading Shen Lanzhou’s words without inflection: “It’s a joyous event for Marshal Qi to have gained a stepmother. What gift shall we send her?”

Xiao Chiye’s smile was thin. “Send her our congratulations.”

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Chapter 148:
Victory and Defeat

WHEN QIAO TIANYA lifted the curtains at dawn, Yao Wenyu was muttering in his sleep. The bedding was light, and as it was not yet the rainy season in Cizhou, the windows were open, bamboo blinds swaying with the breeze. Yao Wenyu lay in the embrace of the wind, as if pillowed against the rain of spring. Still, the pain in his legs had made him sweat.

Several months ago, the storm within the Imperial College had struck the court officials of common origins like a slap in the face. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu had been first affected, but not even Yao Wenyu had been spared. When the storm had blown over, Yao Wenyu had remained under Kong Qiu's protection and rarely appeared in public in Qudu. He had quietly visited Hai Liangyi's final resting place on Mount Bodhi every day until the one his carriage was ambushed.

That day, Yao Wenyu had run into Xue Xiuzhuo.

Xue Xiuzhuo and Yao Wenyu were fellow students; even before studying under Hai Liangyi, they'd attended Mister Changzong's school together. Hai Liangyi had initially favored Yao Wenyu on account of Old Master Yao. By that time, Xue Xiuzhuo had thrice sent visitation cards to Hai Liangyi in the hopes of becoming the esteemed elder's student. But all his attempts were in vain.

Yao Wenyu had often heard Xi Hongxuan talk of Xue Xiuzhuo. This common-born son of the Xue Clan had lived in straitened circumstances throughout his early years in the Xue residence. After the death of his father, the various cliques within the Xue Clan fought tooth and nail over their inheritance of fields and mansions. They stirred up such a ruckus that everyone in Qudu came to know of it, and it was for this reason the other noble clans held them in contempt.

The clan's eldest lawful son, Xue Xiuyi, was a pretentious dilettante who feigned sophistication—for instance, he knew less than nothing about antiques, yet was constantly hoodwinked into spending tremendous

quantities of silver on them. Within a scant few years, the Xue Clan's wealth was squandered clean away. The collateral branches gradually distanced themselves from the main family, realizing there was no use in trying to get blood from a stone. As for Xue Xiuyi, he spent his days fooling around. Aspiring to join the Hanlin Academy, where scholars and advisors debated policy, he had sent a great number of gifts to Hua Siqian—then both Grand Secretary and the Hanlin Chancellor—but his efforts earned him only the cold shoulder. Even the Fei Clan's Helian Marquis viewed him with disdain.

Everyone had thought this spelled the end for the Xue Clan. But it was at this moment that Xue Xiuzhuo stepped to the fore. He passed all the official examinations and was legitimately initiated into the Hanlin Academy on the strength of his merits. Hai Liangyi himself had reviewed the exams back then, and he had found Xue Xiuzhuo's essays on contemporary politics outstanding; it was no fluke that he placed near the top of the ranks.

Yao Wenyu, too, had read all of Xue Xiuzhuo's essays. Xue Xiuzhuo had been bursting with fresh drive and sharp ideas when he was first inducted into the Hanlin Academy; some even saw the shadow of Qi Huilian in him. He repeatedly submitted memorials to the emperor advocating for resurveying fields outside the capital—this was Qi Huilian's unfinished work. Even within the eight cities of Qudu, the noble clans occupied commoners' farms and fields but kept that land off the record, thus avoiding the land tax on thousands of acres of farmland. No number of audits could reveal this situation while Wei Huaigu and his cohort had control over the Ministry of Revenue.

Unfortunately, Xue Xiuzhuo had no powerful backer like the crown prince of the Eastern Palace to protect him. His memorials offended not only Hua Siqian, but also many court officials from the noble clans, as well as the late Pan Rugui. All these people had formed an alliance by the end of the reign of Yongyi and were later inextricably tied to Zhongbo's fall. Even the seemingly marginalized Helian Marquis of the Fei Clan had encroached on the commoners' fields in Chuancheng. Xue Xiuzhuo was like a rabbit surrounded by wolves. He made quite a scene in the imperial court, and the

denunciations came hard and fast. At the time, Hua Siqian had even used Xue Xiuzhuo as an excuse to strike out against Hai Liangyi, who had promoted the young man, as well as the other officials from common households Hai Liangyi represented.

Those days had been difficult ones. Even Yao Wenyu, removed as he was from court and capital, had caught whispers of the tempest. Kong Qiu had been among the officials demoted back then, and several minor, low-ranking officials like Liang Cuishan had also been inadvertently caught in the crossfire. Hai Liangyi managed to dodge the brunt of Hua Siqian's blows; he was shunted back into the position of the lowest-ranking Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and reduced his attendance in the imperial court for several years after. The officials from common households were forced into a state of hibernation yet again. Xue Xiuzhuo's promising career was nipped in the bud, and he was publicly admonished by Hua Siqian. He had only just entered the imperial court and barely taken his seat in the Hanlin Academy before he was demoted to the lowly position of scribe for the recording of state history.

However, it had not been fear that motivated Hai Liangyi's concession back then. His strategic retreat was rather the beginning of the common officials' preparations to fight back. Hai Liangyi had long been concerned over the deficit in the state treasury. Instead of raising difficult questions within Qudu, those loyal to him began their investigation with the account books of the surrounding regions. For this task, Hai Liangyi nominated Xue Xiuzhuo, and indeed it was at the behest of Hai Liangyi that Xue Xiuzhuo went on to become the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. Xue Xiuzhuo did not disappoint him—after that flurry of denouncements, he had grown far more prudent.

For eight whole years, Xue Xiuzhuo remained the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. Based solely on his evaluations during this period, he ought to have been promoted several times over. Hai Liangyi had deliberately held him back to be tempered and honed.

Yao Wenyu understood Hai Liangyi's intent all too well. He felt this man must have truly been born to be an official. Not only did Xue Xiuzhuo

harbor no resentment at this treatment, he did a spectacular job in his smaller role. He knew the local political situations in Juexi and the eight cities of Qudu like the back of his hand. Jiang Qingshan was no doubt the one to thank for the restoration of Juexi's granaries to their former abundance, but neither could Xue Xiuzhuo's contributions be dismissed.

On the other hand, Jiang Qingshan held Yao Wenyu in no high esteem. He had never read Yao Wenyu's essays; he and his cohort were focused on practical action. To pragmatic officials like them, even if Yao Wenyu was a true genius, it was Xue Xiuzhuo who had their regard.

Xiao Chiye had once mused that Xue Xiuzhuo was more truly Hai Liangyi's student than Yao Wenyu was. Xue Xiuzhuo, not Yao Wenyu, had fulfilled the wishes of Hai Liangyi and the officials from common households. His shocking testimonial at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds had forced Hua Siqian to revolt, saving years of painstaking effort by the common officials from going to waste. The Xiande Emperor had passed away in short order, the empress dowager had been forced to retreat, and the Hua and Pan factions fell to pieces. The nation welcomed a young and healthy new emperor.

Alas, fate was against them. Li Jianheng was not cut out to sit on the throne. Still, before Hai Liangyi's death, Yao Wenyu bore Xue Xiuzhuo no ill feeling. In his eyes, Xue Xiuzhuo was in a unique and tenuous position. He appeared to have abandoned the noble clans, yet he still had the support of Xi Hongxuan and others; it was as if he walked a tightrope, and the pawns on either side were all expendable—including himself.

It was raining when Yao Wenyu met Xue Xiuzhuo on Mount Bodhi. They took shelter together in a thatched pavilion, where they settled down to play a game of weiqi. Not a word was spoken between them during the game, nor a single glance exchanged. They played for several hours, eventually ending in a draw.

Before leaving, Xue Xiuzhuo opened his umbrella and looked back at Yao Wenyu. "Will you sit for the spring imperial examinations next year?"

Yao Wenyu collected the weiqi pieces one by one. "The court already has a Xue Yanqing; what need is there for a Yao Yuanzhuo?"

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The two of them—one standing and one sitting—listened as the rain poured and the wind blew harder outside the pavilion. A gust billowed through Yao Wenyu's robes. He held the weiqi box in one hand and dropped the jade pieces in with the others, looking for all the world like an immortal sitting at leisure—as if he would ride away on the wind in the very next instant. As they spoke, the storm flung a single speck of mud onto his green robe, marring the fluttering fabric and reducing him to a mere mortal.

Xue Xiuzhuo glanced down at that speck of mud. "When Teacher was seriously ill, Kong Qiu paid him a visit. You counseled him in the main hall, but the one you plotted against was Han Cheng." He looked up at Yao Wenyu's face, as if seeing him in a new light. "At that moment, I realized: That's all there is to Yao Wenyu."

The final weiqi piece in Yao Wenyu's fingers slid into its box. "You're right. That's all there is to Yao Wenyu."

"A year ago, Teacher thought opportunity had come knocking. With the Tianchen Emperor's support, those from common households could show the court what they were made of—but in the end, it was wishful thinking," Xue Xiuzhuo said calmly. "The war between the two sides has raged for years, yet few of the issues that divide them have been resolved. Twenty years ago, Qi Huilian proposed a survey of the local farm fields to prevent the noble clans from occupying the land and to restore the regular collection of field taxes. To date, this proposal has yet to be implemented. What has Great Zhou accomplished under Teacher's venerated principles of stability?"

"In the third year of Xiande, Juexi was struck by natural disaster," Yao Wenyu replied. "The state treasury was empty, and Hua Siqian was unwilling to provide aid to the thirteen cities. Tens of thousands of commoners were left destitute and homeless. It was Jiang Qingshan who took it upon himself to unlock the granaries and risked his head taking on insurmountable debt. If not for the assistance of the moderates in Qudu, who audited the accounts and forced Hua Siqian's hand, all the grain in Zhongbo would have streamed into the pockets of the noble clans. If saving one person is not considered an achievement, and neither is saving tens of

thousands, then, in your opinion, how many must be saved for it to be considered an accomplishment?”

“The moderates who saved tens of thousands in Juexi are the same ones who allowed the tragedy that took place in Zhongbo. A physician saves one man, but it’s the court official who saves the masses.” Xue Xiuzhuo had turned his back on Yao Wenyu as he spoke; now he clenched his fists and turned around. “How many years has it been? Yet Teacher was still fixated on the conflict between the common-born officials and nobility. Look at Kong Qiu; look at the current students of the Imperial College. Are the noble clans the only ones drawing lines based on family status? The riots in the Imperial College touched off at the slightest spark, yet Kong Qiu still has yet to realize that those under his leadership from common households hold the same prejudices against officials from noble clans as the noble clans do toward them. The moderates’ gradual monopoly of the Imperial College runs entirely counter to your grandfather’s original intent to revive the institution.”

Yao Wenyu met his eyes. “You plotted to murder the Tianchen Emperor and incite conflict between factions, which put the Grand Secretariat in a perilous position. You instigated Han Cheng to ambush Xiao Chiye and forced Libei to turn, giving the empress dowager the opportunity to consolidate military power in Qidong. You enabled her to exercise the authority of the Son of Heaven, then gave the emperor’s daughter a hand up to the throne. You calculated every step meticulously, drawing everyone into your web.” Yao Wenyu rose to his feet, black and white pieces tumbling to the ground. “*You* forced our teacher to his death.”

The clatter of weiqi pieces falling mimicked the shattering storm, so sharp it could cut one to the quick.

Rain pelted Xue Xiuzhuo’s arm where it was exposed to the tempest. He met Yao Wenyu’s gaze without the slightest flicker. They were students of the same school and the same teacher, educated under the same man’s tutelage, guided by the same mentor, and concerned with the same topics in their essays and examinations. Yet they had grown to be polar opposites.

“One day I will die,” Xue Xiuzhuo said hoarsely. “Whether I am forsaken and deserted by all, or bring ruin upon myself, I will walk this path

to the end.”

“Then you will stop at nothing to kill others and yourself.” Yao Wenyu released his grip on the last stone he held, letting it fall. “You can’t save all the people of the land.”

“The restoration of Great Zhou is nigh.” Xue Xiuzhuo took a step closer. “The old-school nobles have been purged, the leaders from common households have all suffered a setback, and the calamity that was the eunuch clique has been eradicated. With the Grand Secretariat, empress dowager, and heir apparent holding one another in check, the rising talents in the imperial court will surge to the fore. Great Zhou is about to have fresh blood coursing through its veins. Yao Wenyu, I die without fear. Even if I am remembered only in infamy, condemned by posterity, I will begrudge nothing. I’ve thrown myself into the flames ignited by Teacher. I do it for myself.”

With this, Xue Xiuzhuo opened up his umbrella again and turned around to step into the rain.

Yao Wenyu remained motionless. “You’ve won for now.” He raised his voice. “You’ve won one game. But this is far from a victory. The land is in chaos, and the variables are endless. You can’t make a pawn of everyone, Xue Xiuzhuo!”

The rain fell in torrents, as if venting the pent-up rage of the skies onto the world. The green bamboo planted by Hai Liangyi’s grave snapped in the storm, and muddy water flowed down the slope, like a face smothered in bitter tears.

“Today it’s a draw. The victor has yet to be determined.” Xue Xiuzhuo stopped in his tracks but did not look back. “But as you say—there’s already a Xue Yanqing in the world. What need is there for a Yao Yuanzhuo? You and I do not walk the same road. After tonight, our paths need not cross again.”

“This game isn’t finished,” Yao Wenyu said. “There is no such thing as a draw where I’m concerned.”

Xue Xiuzhuo’s shoulders shook, as if with laughter. He looked back for the last time and pinned his gaze on Yao Wenyu. A curtain of rain fell

between them. Suddenly it seemed they had always been separated by a deep chasm, like the reflections of heaven and earth—they could never be fellow travelers. Yao Yuanzhuo and the always-obstructed Xue Yanqing. From their lineage to Hai Liangyi's choice of pupil, Xue Xiuzhuo had never once won. Yet at this moment, he was the picture of condescending pity.

You've lost.

The carriage raced down the mountain road, surrounded by the clamor of barking dogs. Their pursuers spurred their galloping horses closer. Yao Wenyu's coachman was already dead. Helpless to control the carriage, Yao Wenyu braced himself against its sides as it rattled haphazardly down the slope. Stray arrows socked into the carriage from behind, lodging in the wood. The next volley sank into the ground beneath the horse's hooves, and the animal snapped its traces in panic.

One of his pursuers leapt onto the back of the carriage. A dagger pierced the carriage's curtain and sliced it open to stab inside.

There was no one else on Mount Bodhi. Yao Wenyu's death was set in stone. From the moment he'd gone up the mountain today, Xue Xiuzhuo had never considered letting him walk down alive.

The carriage tumbled into a ditch, collapsing in on all sides. Yao Wenyu's stomach lurched. The horse, in desperate pain, struggled to right itself as Yao Wenyu freed the reins and mounted it. The vicious growls of the dogs panicked the horse, which fled on a lame leg. Clinging to the horse's neck without a saddle, Yao Wenyu was nearly swiped off by the branches whipping past amid the jolts and bumps. Yet the horse had only galloped for a moment before an arrow found one of its remaining good legs, and Yao Wenyu went flying.

The chase had brought them to the foot of the mountain. The leader of the group was worried they'd miss their chance if Yao Wenyu kept running. He looped a rope around Yao Wenyu's ankles and dragged him over the ground toward their own carriage. The rain had subsided, but the sky had not yet fallen dark. To finish the job, they broke both Yao Wenyu's legs with their scabbards and stuffed him into the carriage.

No sooner had they bundled him in than the sound of hooves rose on the mountain road below. Realizing they'd soon have company, the leader yanked the carriage curtains down and barked, "Put your blades away!"

The new party arrived in a display of ostentatious extravagance: The escorts on both sides of the carriage were men from the Eight Great Battalions, whose numbers filled the narrow bridle path. The leader of the attackers signaled for their driver to pull the carriage to the side, and the group deferentially formed a line at the edge of the path to make way for the approaching party.

Within the closed-up carriage, Yao Wenyu's mouth was gagged. His body spasmed with pain, but his mind remained clear. Back soaked with sweat, he knocked his forehead hard against the frame of the carriage.

When the leader heard the knocking from inside, he glared at his subordinates. One promptly whipped the horse several times, bellowing at the poor animal to cover the sound.

But the newcomers did not leave. The curtains of the carriage in the middle of the procession lifted to reveal Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, her hair swept up in the fashion of a married woman. A fine furrow appeared between her brows. "Keep the noise down, please; there's an infant in the carriage."

Yao Wenyu instantly recognized her voice. A muffled cry escaped his throat, and he slammed his forehead against the walls until it was bloody.

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue looked sharply toward the carriage. "Is someone inside? Tell your master to come out and see me."

By now, the leader had recognized her himself. He made his obeisance as he scrambled for an excuse. "My master's mistress is inside. She's gone mad and is threatening to take her own life; we couldn't possibly let her out, lest she offend your eyes. Please go on ahead, Your Highness."

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue knit her slender willow brows. "This is the resting place of the secretariat elder. What nonsense! Men, lift the curtains of that carriage!"

At this, the leader changed tactics, whipping out his authority token, which bore the copper seal of the military. “We’re on official business with warrants in hand, acting under the orders of the Ministry of Justice. Without the proper authority, no one may meddle in the affairs of the court at their whim, Your Highness. Even if your father, the Helian Marquis himself, were here today, we wouldn’t allow him to open the curtain!”

Since marrying into the Pan Clan, the commandery princess had been living in Dancheng. After Hai Liangyi’s death, she followed her husband to the capital. She and her husband had initially arranged to visit the Yao manor today, but upon arrival, the couple had learned Yao Wenyu had yet to return from his trip into the mountains. Zhaoyue knew Yao Wenyu’s character—he would never miss an appointment without reason—and so climbed into her carriage to look for him herself. She could see at a glance that this group was up to no good.

The leader felt certain there was nothing the commandery princess could do. No one from the Fei Clan held any position of importance in court; the Helian Marquis and his family couldn’t afford to go around rashly offending people. He sneered. “If Your Highness refuses to go, we’ll take our leave first.”

Yet before he could turn, the guards from the Eight Great Battalions gripped the hilts of their blades.

A slender finger emerged from within the carriage and gently lifted the curtain, revealing a coil of hair adorned with flowers. The narrow-sleeved palace gown of a court lady flowed neatly down to pool on the floor of the carriage. The toes of an exquisite pair of satin shoes peeked out from the hem, while eastern pearls shone along the edge of the woman’s collar. Her voice was soft and gentle. “If the commandery princess doesn’t possess the authority, what about me?”

The leader was still frozen in place when he heard a guard thunder, “The esteemed Third Lady Hua is onboard. Kneel!”

Who in Qudu besides the precious apple of the empress dowager’s eye would dare answer to the address of *Third Lady Hua*?

Cold sweat sheened the man’s brow as he sank to the ground and kowtowed. “I deserve a thousand deaths for obstructing the third lady’s way!”

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Chapter 149:
Third Lady Hua

IT WAS DARK in Qudu, and lanterns had been lit on both sides of the streets. Hua Xiangyi's carriage passed through the city gates and drove straight for the Pan manor. She told her attendants only that she'd be talking late into the night with Zhaoyue, then sent someone into the palace with the message that she would return later.

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's path to marriage had not been smooth. Her father the Helian Marquis had initially set his mind on Yao Wenyu for her groom; then, after the empress dowager's intervention, turned his attention to Xiao Chiye. In the end, both prospects had fallen through. The marquis had found this humiliating. Commandery Princess Zhaoyue was the lawful daughter of the Fei Clan, yet she was no longer young—she had to be married without further delay.

Around this time, it happened that Han Cheng came calling. The Helian Marquis had leapt at his chance, and betrothed her to a son of the Han Clan. But this marriage, too, was doomed. His son, the young marquis Fei Shi, was an idle loafer who was well aware that the young man from the Han Clan was one too. In fact, he was even less competent than Han Cheng's younger brother, Han Jin. Fei Shi held him in contempt, finding him unworthy of his elder sister. He gathered some of his friends and made a scene in the pleasure quarter, scuttling any chances of the union coming to fruition.

The Helian Marquis now found he couldn't control his own son. In desperation, he considered several options before landing on Pan Lin's younger brother Pan Yi, the second son of the Pan Clan, born of the first concubine. The two families knew each other inside and out, and they were both members of the Eight Great Clans. Fei Shi carefully observed his potential brother-in-law for a time, and only after he was satisfied with the groom did Commandery Princess Zhaoyue finally marry.

Pan Yi was a refined and scholarly man who'd originally held the post of Director of the Bureau of Waterways and Irrigation under the Ministry of Works. After Pan Xiangjie survived the public ditches case and his son Pan Lin took over the disgraced Wei Huaigu's post in the Ministry of Revenue, Pan Yi was promoted and transferred back to the Pan Clan's hometown to serve as commandant of the garrison in Dancheng. He was fond of reading and had deep respect for Yao Wenyu's talents, and thus had happily accompanied his wife to pay Yao Wenyu a visit.

Though he still bore the title of Vice Minister, Pan Yi's elder brother Pan Lin was now fully overseeing the Ministry of Revenue. So much had happened in Qudu since the beginning of the year that the official document of appointment from the imperial court elevating him to Minister still had yet to be issued.

When Pan Lin came back from court, he found Pan Yi waiting at home for his wife to return. The two brothers were conversing in the front hall when an attendant emerged from the inner courtyard with a message. When he heard it, Pan Lin was taken aback. "The third lady wants to see *me*?"

Hua Xiangyi was yet unmarried and was the empress dowager's favorite besides. The guards who accompanied her in and out of the palace were not to be underestimated. It was near impossible for men outside the family to get so much as a glimpse of her. Even their father Pan Xiangjie had to await a summons if he hoped to see her. Pan Lin had no idea why he'd been called, but he didn't dare dally; he hastily rose alongside Pan Yi as the two hurried over.

The moment Pan Yi entered the courtyard, he saw his wife weeping under the eaves. Spotting a physician inside, Pan Lin started in shock, thinking Hua Xiangyi had been injured. He rushed forward at once. "Sister-in-Law, what happened?"

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's eyes were red from crying. She clutched her handkerchief, but before she could get a word out, dissolved into sobs again. She covered her face and turned away as Pan Yi stepped forward to coax her, taking her hands. "My dear, what's all this?!"

From inside, they heard Hua Xiangyi's gentle tones: "The vice minister and the commandant are both like elder brothers to me. There's no need to observe the formalities so scrupulously. Please come in to talk."

Upon hearing Hua Xiangyi, Pan Lin was immediately relieved—she didn't *sound* injured. He hesitated a moment, exchanging a glance with his brother, then lifted the curtain and entered. A screen was set up inside, behind which Hua Xiangyi sat in the seat of honor, facing the door. Both men knelt and spoke in unison. "These humble subjects pay their respects to the third lady."

"Honored brothers, please rise," she said.

Through the beaded curtain on one side of the room, Pan Lin saw the physician kneeling at someone's side. "Who's injured?"

After a moment of silence, Hua Xiangyi answered, "The man lying inside is none other than the Grand Secretary's beloved pupil, Yao Wenyu."

"Yuanzhuo?!" Pan Yi's first exclamation was one of delight—but his face fell the moment the name left his mouth. "Good heavens! Was he hurt on Mount Bodhi? I heard the bridle paths on the mountain have been in poor shape for years; it's a perilous trip on rainy days."

The commandery princess came to stand nearby and wiped her tears. "My cousin wasn't hurt in an accident. He was attacked!" She was so overwhelmed with sorrow she could hardly speak. "His legs… What will become of him?"

Pan Lin's mind was racing. He currently stood at the critical juncture before a promotion. Once the official appointment was issued, he would only have to wait a few years for positive evaluations to make up for the impeachments he had received during the public ditches case; he had a bright future ahead of him. Moreover, Yao Wenyu's position was unique. Given the political undercurrent presently surging through the imperial court, Pan Lin was hesitant to involve himself in this matter. Any move he made might brand him a supporter of one faction or another. But he truly respected Hai Liangyi.

After a moment's pause, Pan Lin said, "Mount Bodhi is on the outskirts of Qudu, and there are patrol squads both inside and outside the

capital. Yuanzhuo's unfortunate encounter is a serious matter. Third Lady, please tell me the details."

Upon seeing that he neither sought excuses nor evaded the issue, Hua Xiangyi knew she'd come to the right man. Pan Lin had a short temper; the only friend he got along with was Fei Shi, and the person he could least stand was Xue Xiuyi. After the public ditches case, when Xiao Chiye hosted a banquet to celebrate the conferment of his noble title, Xue Xiuyi had humiliated Pan Lin in every way possible. Pan Lin had made a vow then: Even if he should starve to death, he would never take a single crumb from the same table as the Xue Clan.

He had refused any contact with the Xue Clan since. Xue Xiuzhuo was at the height of his popularity in Qudu due to his influence over the heir apparent; even so, Pan Lin had never paid him a visit. Xiao Chiye had helped the Pan Clan out of their predicament during the public ditches case, saving Pan Xiangjie from dying as a scapegoat for Wei Huaigu. And unbeknownst to Pan Lin, the ditches diagram he had gifted Xiao Chiye in repayment had become the key that helped Qiao Tianya and the rest escape Qudu.

Even when Xiao Chiye had been besieged by Han Cheng and accused of regicide, Pan Lin had been in no hurry to distance himself. While his father, Pan Xiangjie, was a fence-sitter who swayed whichever way the wind blew, Pan Lin was worthy of the description *upright*.

Hua Xiangyi recounted how they'd happened upon Yao Wenyu in hushed tones. Eventually, she said, "Would the vice minister be willing to hear what I have to say on this matter?"

"This humble subject is all ears," Pan Lin answered.

Hua Xiangyi glanced over at the beaded curtain. "This storm raging in Qudu is far from over. The tragedy that befell Yuanzhuo today was no coincidence. The vice minister knows the affairs of the imperial court better than me. The Grand Secretary's fatal remonstration will be remembered as Great Zhou's greatest regret. Yuanzhuo is not merely the Grand Secretary's beloved pupil, but also the Yao Clan's beloved son. His reputation may be in tatters after the Imperial College riots, but his talents and knowledge

persist, as does the integrity of his character. His resolve will only grow stronger after this tribulation; there's no reason he can't turn things around in the future and lead the scholars of the land in reclaiming the glory of the Imperial College."

Pan Lin was quiet.

After a long silence, Hua Xiangyi continued, "After tonight, Yuanzhuo must leave Qudu as soon as possible. I'm about to be married far away in Qidong; so close to the wedding, it's difficult for me to move freely about the city. Even with my rank, I can't openly see him out of the capital."

Rising to her feet, Hua Xiangyi slowly knelt in a formal bow to Pan Lin, a bent silhouette across the screen.

Pan Lin paled. He strode forward and exclaimed, "This won't do! Third Lady, please rise!"

But Hua Xiangyi did not raise her head. "Yuanzhuo was blessed to have been taught by one wise teacher after another. I've read every one of his essays. At the moment, the heir apparent has been confirmed but not yet crowned, and the Hanlin Academy sits empty; the tripartite balance of power Auntie leads is not sustainable, and Kong Qiu can barely keep his head above water. I may be only a girl, but I know that men of such outstanding talent are one in a million." She paused, then solemnly continued, "Chengzhi, please."

If it wasn't clear before, her use of his courtesy name now made it evident her plea came from the bottom of her heart.

Pan Lin couldn't help feeling ashamed upon seeing how far Hua Xiangyi was willing to go to save Yao Wenyu. "Third Lady, please rise! I also respect and cherish Yuanzhuo's talents. Of course helping him is the right thing to do. Tomorrow morning, Yuanzhuo will follow my younger sister-in-law out of Qudu and recuperate in Dancheng. After he recovers from his injuries, he can decide what he'd like to do." Remembering Hai Liangyi, he went on, "Although the Grand Secretary didn't share our political views, I still esteemed him. How courageous and upstanding it was

for a civil minister to remonstrate with his death! Even if only for the sake of the Grand Secretary's memory, I'd be willing to lend a hand."

"The perpetrator of this violence must already know Yuanzhuo escaped death today," Hua Xiangyi replied. "To be safe, I'd like to ask the vice minister to think of a way to keep his departure secret."

"I have a solution for that already," Pan Lin assured her.

"It's getting late; I must return to the palace." Hua Xiangyi stood and let the maidservant support her as she crossed to the beaded curtain and gazed in at Yao Wenyu, his face pale as a sheet. In the end, she said nothing but simply took her leave.

Two hours after Hua Xiangyi's departure, a corpse wrapped in a straw mat was carried through the back doors of the Pan manor. The man who came to dig for news in the outer courtyard didn't get all the details, only that a beggar the commandery princess had taken pity on died of sickness in the middle of the night. The people sent to pursue Yao Wenyu, who had been crouching in wait for hours outside the manor, tailed the corpse all the way to the public burial grounds. After examining it, their leader found that the body was a match for Yao Wenyu's physique; even the wounds on his legs were identical. There was some concern, given that the face of the corpse was disfigured; however, he bore the same wounds on his lips as Yao Wenyu.

Not daring to tarry, the leader withdrew with his men and returned to report the news.

The next day, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue and Pan Yi departed for Dancheng. The princess had very recently given birth to their child, and there were so many nannies and maidservants accompanying her that they traveled with almost twenty carriages. As for Pan Lin, he left as usual to attend morning court. He saw Kong Qiu and Cen Yu standing nearby as he waited at the foot of the stairs but, worried he was being watched, did not approach them.

Nowadays, the heir apparent rose hours before dawn and attended classes at sunrise. The tutors the Grand Secretariat had arranged for her

were hand-picked scholars and academicians from the Hanlin Academy, and her classes did not conclude until midday. Meanwhile, the empress dowager continued holding court behind the screen. In practice, Li Jianting had merely switched from attending classes in the Xue manor to attending classes in the palace. As long as the Grand Secretariat didn't approve her ascension, she would continue to be a student. The Ministry of Rites had long been making preparations for the coronation, but with Kong Qiu and the others delaying it, the grand ceremony now seemed impossibly far away.

Xue Xiuzhuo still personally taught Li Jianting. While the girl lacked the authority to participate in the affairs of government, she had the right to attend court and listen. She slept very little. After her morning classes, she would take a short nap, then sit in on the Grand Secretariat council led by Kong Qiu and Xue Xiuzhuo in the afternoon. All matters pertaining to the Six Ministries were reported on in the Grand Secretariat. Li Jianting rarely spoke up as they stood and deliberated over these matters of policy, but her attitude was always respectful. Whether for class or council, she always arrived before the ministers and waited deferentially under the eaves of Mingli Hall.

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu had initially disliked Li Jianting, but even they had to concede that the girl was sincere; her desire to learn was far keener than Li Jianheng's had ever been.

When court adjourned, Pan Lin boarded his carriage. As he prepared to lower the curtain, he spied Xue Xiuzhuo walking through the palace gates with a group of officials. The two men's eyes met for an instant. Pan Lin nodded calmly and managed a slight bow before letting down the curtain and speeding away.

Qiao Tianya shut the window with a soft *thud*.

Yao Wenyu woke instantly. It was as if he had only just stepped out of the rattling carriage; he felt stifled by the heat. He slid his wary gaze across the room and saw Qiao Tianya.

"It's early yet," Qiao Tianya said. "You can sleep a little longer."

“The events I dreamed of were not ones I’d like to look back on,” Yao Wenyu responded, his expression unreadable.

Qiao Tianya poured himself tea and took a sip, then raised his cup toward Yao Wenyu. “Want some?”

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu replied, “There’s no taste in tea. How about some wine?”

“You’ve yet to recover from your injuries. No wine.” As Qiao Tianya spoke, he removed a flask of shaojiu from his waist, shook it a few times, and twisted it open. “I’ll drink it for you. You can watch.”

When Qiao Tianya lowered the flask, Yao Wenyu commented, “Excellent wine.”

Qiao Tianya’s unruly hair slipped down and covered his eyes. His stubble, which he’d allowed to grow out, had yet to be shaved clean. He stroked it and said, “It’s worth but a few strings of copper coins, far from excellent. Once you’re better, I’m willing to spend a hefty pile of silver to let you taste the good stuff.”

The corner of Yao Wenyu’s lips lifted slightly.

Leaning against the table, Qiao Tianya looked at him. “The military craftsman from Libei will arrive with your chair in a few days. We can go out and see the autumn scenery of Cizhou.”

Yao Wenyu’s smile melted away in an instant. He looked out the window; the windchimes were tinkling under the eaves. He was quiet for a very long time before saying, “May I trouble you to ask the vice commander to prepare a generous gift on my behalf for the wedding between Hua and Qi tomorrow? Third Lady Hua saved my life. Please thank her for me as well. Don’t tell her anything else. Just let her know I’m fine.”

Qiao Tianya agreed that he would.

Yao Wenyu let his gaze go distant. “You can play the qin now.”

When Shen Zechuan woke, he heard the faint sound of qin music from the courtyard.

“Qiao Tianya is a man of hidden talents,” Fei Sheng quipped.

Shen Zechuan tilted his head. “When the Qiao Clan fell apart, all the delicate sensibilities he’d possessed as a young master vanished with it. He had a difficult time during his exile; he had to fight stray dogs for food and care for his elder sister-in-law at the same time. All he has left from the old days is that seven-stringed qin of his. He cleans and smooths it every day; it’s his most prized possession. But he never plays for the entertainment of others—this is what remains of his young master’s pride.”

Fei Sheng had seen the seven-stringed qin, but not even Ding Tao dared touch it. This matter of gentleman’s pride was not a thing he understood, but he’d never disparaged it. He had worked with Qiao Tianya in the Embroidered Uniform Guard for years. He might have wanted to take Qiao Tianya’s place, first in Qudu and then in Cizhou, but that was just business; even he had to acknowledge Qiao Tianya’s ability.

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Chapter 150:
Treacherous Minister

THE DEATH of the Tianchen Emperor was still very recent; according to custom, the marriage between Hua and Qi ought to have been postponed while the nation mourned. But since Xiao Chiye had rebelled and fled Qudu, Qudu had favors to ask of Qidong. The empress dowager and Grand Secretariat deliberated at length before eventually deciding Hua Xiangyi might be married in the seventh month—only slightly too soon for propriety.

The empress dowager spared no expense for the nuptials; the dowry she prepared, packed into endless wagons and carriages, stretched far longer than the typical ten li. The Ministry of Rites made all the arrangements in accordance with the wedding protocols for a princess. Han Cheng himself led the extensive ceremonial guard that sent her off, and the number of nurses and maidservants in her retinue was too many to count.

Hua Xiangyi boarded the carriage. Just as it was about to depart, the empress dowager took one stumbling step after it, wishing to call out to her. But even now she was mindful of her dignity; she merely held onto Aunt Liuxiang's arm and murmured as the eastern pearls in her ears swayed, "My darling…"

After leaving Qudu, the procession rolled toward Qidong along Chuancheng's public roads, passing through the outskirts of Chazhou along the way. Worried they'd face trouble from the Chazhou bandits, Han Cheng had brought along men from the Eight Great Battalions for protection. But the journey was surprisingly uneventful; Chazhou's prefect, Luo Mu, even sent his own congratulatory gifts when they passed by. From Chazhou they continued south, to where Qi Zhuyin waited on the Qidong border.

"Speaking of Qi Zhuyin," Han Cheng asked Hua Xiangyi through the curtain, his horse nearly bumping the carriage, "the third lady hasn't met her before, right?"

A soft sound of affirmation rose from within.

Han Cheng loved flaunting his experience. He perked up at once. “Let this old subject share a few stories with the third lady. Although Qi Zhuyin is a woman, she’s not easy to get along with. The third lady typically resides in the inner palace, so you’re probably not familiar with her ferocious demeanor when she enters the capital every year. The Ministry of Revenue was in a tight spot during the reign of Xiande, yet she dared command her soldiers to obstruct Minister Wei’s sedan to ask for the military salaries of Qidong’s troops. But the Ministry of Revenue genuinely had nothing to give her. After that, she sought out a bunch of ruffian loan sharks in Qudu; she was seen hanging out with them in the streets.”

Hua Xiangyi had only ever seen Qi Zhuyin through a screen. During that Court Officials’ Feast, among the all-male attendance of civil ministers and military generals, Qi Zhuyin had been a particular exception. She hadn’t stood out much during her early years in Qidong; before Qi Shiyu handed over his commander’s seal, everyone had speculated over which of her brothers would take up his mantle. And after her expedition to rescue Qi Shiyu, Qi Zhuyin was first denied entry into the capital, then the imperial court dragged the matter of her conferment on for several months on the grounds that her military achievements were yet to be confirmed. When that had been resolved, the Jade Dragon Terrace fiasco broke out just before the day of her conferment. Even with the support of the empress dowager, Qi Zhuyin merely took over Qi Shiyu’s commander’s seal and did not inherit his title. In other words, every battle Qi Zhuyin fought today only accumulated prestige for Qidong and not for herself. If she never married, she would be considered merely a daughter of Qi once retiring from the front lines, with no noble title to her name. Conversely, her brothers would be set for life with both position and inheritance, as long as they begat sons as soon as possible.

Han Cheng was still talking, but from Hua Xiangyi’s silence, it seemed she had fallen asleep in the carriage. Gradually Han Cheng felt her disinterest and fell silent, a little embarrassed.

The wedding procession traveled until evening, when a streak of red, more vivid than the sunset, emerged on the horizon. Hooves thundered amid the billowing waves of heat, revealing ranks of light cavalry stretching

far into the distance, all dressed in robes of red. The military flag of Qidong fluttered in the wind like a dragon soaring toward them. A storm of yellow sand swirled up and slapped Han Cheng with a faceful of dust.

Qi Zhuyin's deputy, Qi Wei, was the first to dismount, brandishing the flag as he called: "*Ready—!*"

The light cavalry behind him dismounted and went down on one knee in perfect synchrony, their armor clanging as they saluted and chorused, "A most respectful welcome to the mistress!"

These two thunderous roars left the palace maids from Qudu so shaken their hearts were pattering; even Han Cheng's hand twitched toward his chest. Waving the dust out of his face, he frowned. "Where's the marshal?"

The sound of hooves circled toward them; by the time they looked around, a rider in red already stood before the carriage. Before Han Cheng could stop her, Qi Zhuyin extended the sheath of her blade and lifted the curtain, tilting her head to peer inside.

Hua Xiangyi had not yet covered her head with the veil; wearing her bridal phoenix coronet of gold and jade, she stared at Qi Zhuyin in shock, her chest pounding, unsure what Qi Zhuyin was going to do.

"Well hello," Qi Zhuyin greeted her. "Stepmother."

Stunned, Han Cheng rushed forward to pull the curtains down. "We have yet to arrive in Cangjun Commandery," he scolded. "How can the marshal lift the third lady's curtain?!"

"I'm just taking a look." Chastised, Qi Zhuyin retracted her hand. "How many times did you rest on the way? You should have arrived yesterday."

Han Cheng led his horse after Qi Zhuyin's as he answered. "It's a long journey, and it's hard to travel safely if we're in too much of a hurry. I thought the marshal would receive us at the southern border of Chazhou, but we didn't see you there."

"I've only just rushed back from Bianjun; I didn't have much time to spare." Qi Zhuyin turned back to Han Cheng. "Why are you getting off

your horse?”

Han Cheng looked around. “The sun’s setting; we should—”

Qi Zhuyin raised her riding crop and pointed east. “Keep going, and we’ll reach the Cejun Commandery long before midnight. There’s a wider road in Cejun, so the journey will be a tad smoother. Come on, back on your horse.”

Han Cheng had been on the road the entire day; he was exhausted. But before he could retort, Qi Zhuyin had spurred her horse on and left him in the dust. Qi Wei remounted and led his light cavalry to surround the ceremonial procession, then gestured Han Cheng politely ahead. “Chief Commander, after you.”

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Though Han Cheng's position was prestigious enough in Qudu, he had no authority over the affairs of the Ministry of War or the Ministry of Revenue. The Embroidered Uniform Guard could throw their weight around in the capital, but they posed no threat to Qi Zhuyin. She was the grand marshal of the five commanderies of Qidong. This was *her* domain, and Han Cheng had no say here. Besides, even the empress dowager had to rely on the Qidong Garrison Troops now.

Han Cheng was seething, but he couldn't let it show. He smiled at Qi Wei, then hauled himself back on his horse to continue their journey.

In the carriage, Hua Xiangyi had returned to her senses, her heart still racing from that stunning sight. The carriage curtain swayed, and she tilted her head to look through the slim gap, catching a glimpse of Qi Zhuyin's back as she rode ahead.

Qi Zhuyin was tall and slender. She must have put in special effort to dress up today. Since she was riding, she wore her hair in a neat tail instead of piled high atop her head as was the common style in Qudu, but she still looked very fine. Without the adornment of pins and precious pearls, she appeared clean and tidy.

She was pretty. Hua Xiangyi continued to study her until Qi Zhuyin abruptly turned and looked back at her.

Xiao Chiye had said to send only his congratulations, but he still instructed someone to prepare a gift. Xiao Jiming prepared one as well. They had a good relationship with Qidong. Even if the situation was delicate at the moment, the sentiment remained, most especially their friendship with Qi Zhuyin.

The wedding between Hua and Qi was the empress dowager's declaration of temporary victory in the tussle for power in Qudu. The Grand Secretariat would have to stabilize the heir apparent before they could continue to contend for dominance. At this moment, Xue Xiuzhuo made a wise decision: He submitted a memorial to the Grand Secretariat and requested Jiang Qingshan be transferred back to Juexi, thereby securing Qudu's supply of grain.

Yao Wenyu sat in his new wheelchair and let Qiao Tianya push him out the door. The weather in Cizhou had been poor lately, and with autumn rain around the corner, the scenery on the city outskirts grew ever more bleak and desolate. Yao Wenyu had been out of the sun for many days; seeing him now, he was like a jade laid bare in the open air.

"It's just as you predicted." Shen Zechuan took in the vast expanse of autumn leaves and solemn stillness of the land as he stood at Yao Wenyu's side. "He transferred Jiang Qingshan back to Juexi."

"I really thought Jiang Qingshan would go to Huaizhou, if only to keep an eye on Cizhou." Zhou Gui, having ridden a horse today, was wearing a narrow-sleeved jacket and pants conducive to riding. He wiped sweat from his brow and said, "Luoxia Pass is close to the city of Quancheng, the hometown of the Xue Clan. It'd make sense for him to worry. I didn't think he'd be willing to send Jiang Qingshan back to Juexi."

Yao Wenyu adjusted his sleeve, into which he'd tucked his kitten. "It's a reasonable concern. Objectively, stationing Jiang Qingshan in Huaizhou would be most advantageous to Xue Xiuzhuo and his Xue Clan."

Shen Zechuan's boots crunched across the fallen leaves, then stilled. He stood, lost in thought. If Jiang Qingshan was transferred to the prefecture of Huaizhou, he could accomplish two things: Firstly, he could obstruct any trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou from taking shape. Secondly, he could both ensure the safety of Quancheng and join them in putting pressure on Luoxia Pass and—by extension—Libei. If such tactics had occurred to Shen Zechuan, they had certainly occurred to Xue Xiuzhuo as well. Yet Xue Xiuzhuo had sacrificed the welfare of Quancheng and chosen Juexi, just as Yao Wenyu had prophesied.

"Xue Xiuzhuo put Jiang Qingshan back in his old place on the board." Shen Zechuan's mouth thinned into a grim line. "*This* is what makes him tough to deal with."

This maneuver meant not only that Xue Xiuzhuo would attempt to restrict Libei and Zhongbo's development by keeping a chokehold on the supply of grain from Juexi, but also that he didn't give a damn about the

gains and losses of the Xue Clan. He harbored no selfish desires, which set him apart from the likes of Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu. What he sought was more complex than benefits for one party or another.

“Jiang Qingshan’s methods are pitiless and harsh,” Yao Wenyu offered. “He’s an effective local governor. The impression people have of him in Qudu is that he’s exacting down to the smallest detail, but the truth is quite the opposite. Juexi has thirteen cities, with two prefectures and two ports; it’s the granary of Great Zhou in both name and reality. The Xi Clan’s businesses have boomed there; even the waterways of the Hua Clan in Dicheng pass through Juexi. If the vice commander had been to Juexi before, you’d understand that Juexi’s prosperity did not happen by chance.”

Yao Wenyu stroked his cat. “Jiang Qingshan is an extraordinarily broad-minded individual who puts people to use regardless of family status or social standing. He never shirks his responsibility regarding major matters of governance, but he knows not to waste his time on minor issues. He never lets go of what he ought to hold fast, and he never misjudges what he should let slip through his fingers. With a Provincial Administration Commissioner like him, it’s not surprising Juexi got back on its feet as swiftly as it did after the disaster in the Xiande years. This is who Jiang Qingshan is. He considers Xue Xiuzhuo a lifelong friend because they share the same political views and ambitions.”

Zhou Gui nodded. “I’ve long heard tell of the political achievements of these two. When the Grand Secretary promoted Xue Xiuzhuo to the Court of Judicial Review after Hua Siqian’s coup, no one in the imperial court opposed it.”

“The vice commander has read Xue Xiuzhuo’s essays on contemporary politics,” Yao Wenyu said. “Does my lord remember the grand mentor’s wish?”

Shen Zechuan knew this by heart; he had inherited Qi Huilian’s knowledge and understood precisely what his teacher had hoped to accomplish back then. After a moment of silence, he said, “To register every household of Great Zhou uniformly under the throne, to map and justly administer every acre of farmland, to consolidate taxes for the ease of the people, and to achieve a balanced treasury to serve the nation.”

Yao Wenyu looked out at the mountains in the distance. “That is exactly what Xue Xiuzhuo wishes to accomplish as well. In this, he and my teacher were both striving to the same end. Teacher had the support of Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and the officials of common households, while Xue Xiuzhuo has the support of the industrious pragmatists, with Jiang Qingshan at the helm. He is not without supporters.”

But the question was, could anyone in the current Zhou empire truly achieve such a thing?

Even the Yellow Register system was something that had taken Qi Huilian many years to implement across the empire. Why had the Eastern Palace been framed for rebellion? Because the next step after the full-scale implementation of this census was the survey of farmlands. Misappropriation of commoners’ fields was rampant in the eight cities of Qudu. If such a policy was implemented, the noble clans would not only have to return the commoners’ fields and accept their punishment according to the law, they would have to belatedly pay the land and field taxes they owed. Eliminating the crown prince was the surest way to prevent this.

Similarly, Hai Liangyi had taught Li Jianheng the way he did in hopes of treating the problem at its source, cutting down to the bone to scrape away the infection. He had wanted Li Jianheng to keep a tight hold over the Grand Secretariat and wield his authority to overhaul the system from the top down. For this, he was willing to charge head-first into the fray on Li Jianheng’s behalf.

But Li Jianheng simply couldn’t do it.

Xue Xiuzhuo had recognized this far earlier than Hai Liangyi. He had instantly abandoned Li Jianheng, along with all his hopes for this emperor and indeed the entire Li Clan. He needed a new sovereign—one who could sit quietly on the throne while he worked. This new emperor must not interfere with the Grand Secretariat, nor vacillate between sides in the struggle between the noble clans and common households. More importantly, this emperor could not be partial toward the frontier powers with all their military might merely for the sake of some brotherly sentiment. And so he had found Li Jianting.

But a plan like this took too long. Qudu was changing every moment. Shen Zechuan himself was a variable. In Qudu, he was at best an abandoned piece on Xue Xiuzhuo's board, a stone that might be conveniently discarded after he dealt with Xi Hongxuan and Wei Huaigu, meant to be wiped out in that pouring rain alongside Xiao Chiye. Xue Xiuzhuo possessed not a sliver of selfishness—this was what made him such a terrifying opponent.

For instance: Xue Xiuyi had endlessly ridiculed, mocked, and humiliated Xue Xiuzhuo, yet Xue Xiuzhuo had made no move to end the life of his lawful eldest brother. In his eyes, Xue Xiuyi was not important in the slightest. It made no difference to him whether Xue Xiuyi lived or died; the family heir was like dust at his feet.

He had killed Qi Huilian, but that was only because Qi Huilian was the tutor of the emperor of Great Zhou. He had attempted to kill Yao Wenyu, but only because Yao Wenyu was an unparalleled talent. He had given both these men a chance to choose, yet both had turned him down. Letting a strategist he could not use walk free was akin to gifting the world's sharpest sword to another. Only by killing them could he protect himself from future trouble.

Above the forest, a solitary wild swan goose soared across the horizon; frost and fog gradually blanketed the landscape. It was growing chillier by the day. Qiao Tianya casually covered Yao Wenyu with a thick coat.

Shen Zechuan tapped his folding fan against his palm, his gaze tracking the goose across the sky on its southward migration. "When Xue Xiuzhuo was teaching the heir apparent in his manor, he likely didn't expect Great Zhou would suffer such a collapse within a mere few years. Not even the greatest genius can account for every single factor or come up with an entirely foolproof strategy. The incident with the military provisions that forced Lu Guangbai to desert was an unexpected variable. Because they lost Lu Guangbai, Qidong missed their opportunity to hunt down Ce'an, and instead of delivering the fatal blow, Qudu released a tiger back to its mountain."

No one could predict the twists and turns of fate, be it Lu Guangbai, Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye, Yao Wenyu, or any other nameless face. Heaven tasked each person with their own challenges; in staggering back to their feet after calamity, those who had once been trapped by their circumstances cast off their shackles. In turbulent times, the order of the world became tenuous—anyone could fight for a share of the spoils. If there were those who clung to the broken fragments of ruins, then there would also be those who brandished their weapons to break through the confining walls.

This was the era of corrupt ministers and scheming traitors.

The fog grew thicker, and rain began to fall. Fei Sheng opened an umbrella and held it over Shen Zechuan. Not long after, they made their way back. Autumn had finally arrived in Cizhou. The wind gusted through the sleeves of Shen Zechuan's robes, nearly snatching away his blue handkerchief. As Shen Zechuan grasped for it, falling leaves danced across the sky and brushed the tips of his fingers.

Withered yellow leaves danced upward in the wind, where the rain pelted them back to scuttle at Xiao Chiye's feet.

Gu Jin reined his horse in, waving a small flag as he shouted, "Master! The bridle path ahead has collapsed. We're trapped!"

As Xiao Chiye mounted Snowcrest, Wu Ziyu spurred his horse forward from behind and raised his voice to be heard through the rain. "Zhao Hui's troops have yet to arrive, and Tudalung Banner is ten li from here. Hassen's cavalry is nearby!"

"The grain wagons are too heavy." Tantai Hu wiped rainwater from his face. "Unless we abandon the provisions and take a detour, Hassen's cavalry is bound to find us tonight."

"The front lines need these supplies," Chen Yang said. "If these provisions fall into Hassen's hands, the prince is going to have a rough go of it." Chen Yang tugged at the reins, his nose and cheeks red from the cold. "We can stay here, but Master has to go."

They had received orders a few days ago to take a roundabout route from the homeland up to the north, taking the road past Base Camp first to provide supplies to Zhao Hui, then continuing on toward the front lines to replenish Xiao Fangxu’s supplies. They’d been told Zhao Hui’s Three Great Battalions would receive them when they arrived at Base Camp, but Zhao Hui had not appeared. Meng couldn’t carry out reconnaissance in the rainstorm. Without him, it was as though Xiao Chiye had been blindfolded.

Xiao Chiye’s eyes were unnaturally calm as he let the raindrops trickle down his cheeks. “Turn around,” he commanded. “We’re going to Tudalung Banner.”

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Chapter 151:
Round-Up

TUDALUNG BANNER was part of the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains, northwest of First Sand Camp. From there, one could reach the lands of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha by riding directly east. Before this year, it had not been in contention—but as Libei drew its front line back again and again, this area had become a strategic point north of the main battlefield. Huhelu's squad had broken through the checkpoints and watchtowers ahead, so Base Camp was forced to confront them on the west side of Tudalung Banner. The two sides had already exchanged several verbal assaults across the marshlands.

From Border Camp, Xiao Chiye had taken a circuitous route that brought him just south of Base Camp. But the collapse of the road had blocked the bridle path leading to Base Camp, and Tudalung Banner lay just east. Hassen's squads often patrolled in this area. If Xiao Chiye refused to leave the provisions and extricate himself and his men, he would no doubt come face-to-face with Hassen with the supplies in tow. The grain wagons were too heavy to maneuver quickly, Wu Ziyu's armored cavalry couldn't move freely through the mud, and the Imperial Army didn't have enough light cavalry to run interference. Under such circumstances, abandoning the wagons was the obvious option; it was much too dangerous to turn around and detour through Tudalung Banner.

Before Wu Ziyu could protest, Chen Yang and the rest had already turned their horses' heads. This was a trust that couldn't be put into words—they obeyed Xiao Chiye unconditionally. Regardless of any risk to their lives, if Xiao Chiye gave the command, they would act without hesitation. Standing among them, Wu Ziyu shuddered involuntarily.

It was midafternoon, but the rain had turned the whole sky dark. Luckily, Gu Jin was well-acquainted with this area and took the lead, guiding the convoy into Tudalung Banner. The grain wagons rolled carefully through the mud; the slightest misstep, and they would sink into

the muck. Everyone stilled their breathing and squinted through the rain, not daring to let their guard down for an instant.

Xiao Chiye planned to hide the grain wagons here.

Even the most valiant Biansha tribesman wouldn't rashly venture into Tudalung Banner. The marshland was just as difficult for them to navigate as for any Libei soldier. Besides, the rain hindered Hassen as well. If Meng couldn't fly, the saker falcons couldn't either. Neither side had a clear view of the enemy's movements through the sheeting rain; they relied on their knowledge of the battlefield to counter each other. Such a delicate equilibrium could only be maintained in the storm. The minute the skies cleared, Xiao Chiye's squad would be crushed by Hassen's assault.

Xiao Chiye rattled off orders. "Wu Ziyu, stay with the wagons and guard the grain. Have your men use heavy chains; I want them to surround the convoy."

The paths around Tudalung Banner were muddy, and the heavy armored cavalry grew even heavier when it rained. It was too easy for the horses' hooves to get bogged down in mud, so staying with the wagons was the most suitable task for them. The horse chains were one of Xiao Fangxu's innovations. By hooking them onto the horses' armor and linking them down the line, they could turn the cavalry into armor for the grain wagons. Even if Hassen broke through Xiao Chiye's diversionary attack and reached deeper into Tudalung Banner, he would be stopped—or at least delayed—by the cavalry's iron wall.

Without moving, Xiao Chiye addressed the Imperial Army. "Hassen is leading the Hanma tribe. They move quickly and aggressively; we shouldn't expect to catch up or stop them. But they should be on the east side of the banner, where there's plenty of scrub to conceal us. The saker falcons can't patrol on rainy days. This is an opportunity."

There was no doubt who was the stronger and who the weaker between them. Xiao Chiye couldn't let Hassen's squad remain intact; he would have no chance of winning that way. He split the Imperial Army into small groups to feel their way out of Tudalung Banner's marshland and strung up ropes to trip the enemies' horses. Once they fell from the saddle,

the unsuspecting Biansha Horsemen would be diverted all over Tudalung Banner; they would lose their advantage.

“Gu Jin will go around Hassen’s squad and hurry to the front lines.” Xiao Chiye turned and looked at him. “If Zhao Hui didn’t come, that means the Liuyang Battalions are unable to move. The situation up north is probably more dire than we thought. At this point, we have to seek help from the front.”

Gu Jin had acquired his recent injury fighting in Tudalung Banner. He knew the roads through the banner by heart. He acknowledged his orders and led a group of lightly equipped scouts on ahead.

“Lao-Hu will take the northeast, and I’ll head due east. Chen Yang stays here.” As Xiao Chiye spoke, he strode forward. “Our first priority is to ensure these provisions are successfully delivered to the battlefield.”

By this point, Chen Yang had followed Xiao Chiye all over Libei and had a clear picture of all the granaries’ reserves. If Xiao Chiye failed, Chen Yang would have to release a falcon once the rain stopped and inform the Northeast Provisions Trail to reallocate army provisions up north without delay. As a supply squad, their lives were nowhere near as important as the provisions they carried for their fellow soldiers.

They were in the foothills of the Hongyan Mountains here; the rain wouldn’t be stopping any time soon. As the Imperial Army moved into position, lying low in the mud, the cold seeped into their bones. Their inner garments, long since soaked through, clung to their skin. Crouching in the boggy soil, their fingers and toes were frozen within the hour.

The autumnal rains of Libei cut like blades. It was only the beginning of the eighth month, yet the temperature had dropped so alarmingly it felt like snow might fall at any moment.

The supply squad had yet to change into their thick, lined winter coats. Before heading out, Xiao Chiye had ordered them to swap the water they carried in their flasks for On Horseback. Strong wine that could dispel the chill was a pivotal aid on this capricious, snow-blown frontier.

Xiao Chiye nursed his flask of wine, one mouthful at a time, as he hunched in the mud.

Historically, battles between Libei and Biansha did not extend beyond the eighth or ninth month. Any later meant risking the coming of snow, at which point both their grasslands would be ravaged by storms. During the long, harsh winter, Libei's craftsmen would tirelessly re-forge and repair equipment for the armored cavalry. Meanwhile, Biansha would herd their flocks of sheep southward. By unspoken agreement, both sides would enter a period of truce. The single notable exception had been the third year of Xiande, when the Hanma tribe had ridden south and breached the banks of the Chashi River, raiding Zhongbo's granaries for the provisions they needed to fight on.

Yet for the past few days, Xiao Chiye had felt an inexplicable premonition: There would be no truce this winter. Amur's assaults were too aggressive. If his incursion into Libei's territory in early spring was merely to plunder supplies, then right now, Amur seemed more like he was bent on a full-fledged war, with no intent to retreat. In transferring Hassen here from Qidong, Amur was bringing his most powerful troops to bear against Libei. It was a marked change from the small-scale skirmishes they had fought over the last few years.

All of a sudden, the sound of hooves cut through the rain. Xiao Chiye closed his flask and held up two fingers, signaling the Imperial Army behind him to lay low. He did the same, his face almost brushing the mud. Only his eyes moved as he searched the brush for the source of the sound. Riders appeared through the curtain of rain, their horses throwing up mud as they galloped. Xiao Chiye watched them approach in silence, easing Wolfsfang from its sheath as the distance between the Imperial Army and the Biansha riders closed.

The pounding of hooves intensified, while the Biansha Horsemen's shrill whistles were drowned by the rain. The ground under Xiao Chiye's palm trembled.

He didn't move, and neither did the Imperial Army behind him. The enemy was right before them; a few steps more, and they would be trampling over the heads of the Imperial Army.

The horse in the lead suddenly neighed, its front hooves caught in the rope. Its knees buckled as it fell. A wave of mud splashed over Xiao Chiye's

face. He moved. Before the rider hit the ground, Wolfsfang was flying free of its sheath. Xiao Chiye took the man's head off with a single stroke, and fresh blood spurted from the empty neck and flowed into the mud. The cavalrymen behind the soldier were caught off guard; their formation scattered in disarray.

Xiao Chiye didn't give them a chance to regroup. The Imperial Army was right behind him as he carved a path through the center of the Biansha Horsemen. Mud and blood trickled down Xiao Chiye's neck and into his collar. The pungent sting of On Horseback burned his stomach, heating his whole body.

This attack was like a blow to the head; it disoriented the Biansha Horsemen and had them scrambling to gather their wits. Both parties were small squads, fighting at close quarters, hacking at one another as the rainwater poured over them. The battle was over in minutes. By the time the Biansha Horsemen pulled themselves together, the Imperial Army had vanished, soundless, into the torrential rain.

In all corners of Tudalung Banner, the Biansha squads were suffering similar assaults. Yet as soon as they tried to counterattack, these ruffian soldiers would shrink away. The Biansha Horsemen found themselves blocked by the edge of Tudalung Banner's marshland, but whenever they tried to turn back and rejoin their fellows, the Imperial Army would sneak up again and attack. After a few rounds, the Biansha Horsemen were beyond fed up. They were unable to pick up speed in this terrain, and their men were scattered in all directions. They were like headless chickens shoved, kicked, and harassed by the Imperial Army. Rage simmered in their guts as they fought.

Xiao Chiye repeatedly hid behind the veil of rain. The Biansha Horsemen turned this way and that, but couldn't make out his exact hiding place. The Imperial Army hadn't the heavy armor and horses of the Libei Armored Cavalry; they could disappear from the Biansha Horsemen's field of view as long as they kept low to the ground, as elusive as any shadow.

Very quickly, Xiao Chiye's flask of wine was empty. The sky had long since gone dark. The Biansha Horsemen were still trapped by the Imperial Army on the fringes of Tudalung Banner, able to neither advance

nor retreat. The Imperial Army seemed to have victory within its grasp; Xiao Chiye had grasped the rhythm of the battle. But he didn't let it go to his head. It didn't matter if the Biansha Horsemen showed weakness or resorted to intimidation; the give and take of attack and defense remained firmly in his control. Only—as time elapsed, there'd still been no sign of Hassen.

The cold was even more biting at night. Xiao Chiye's boots were clogged with mud, and the rain made the ground slick. To prevent his blade from slipping from his grip, Xiao Chiye had wound a strip of cloth around the hilt and between his thumb and index finger. By now, the fabric was soaked through. He squatted and tore the sodden cloth away to replace it with a fresh one.

A human's physical strength was limited. This sort of push-and-pull battle required both sides to be on high alert at all times. Their nerves were stretched taut; they couldn't afford to overlook the slightest detail. But even Xiao Chiye had to catch his breath sometime. He closed his eyes and shook his head twice, as if shaking off the numbness of the repetitive maneuvers.

By the time the sun rose, the reinforcements from the front line Gu Jin had gone for would arrive—but tonight was critical. Heaven still favored Xiao Chiye. Though the rain had abated, there would be neither stars nor moon tonight. This inky darkness would remain the Imperial Army's best disguise.

He huffed out a breath of warm air and flexed his fingers before tightening his grip on Wolfsfang once again. But as he pushed himself to his feet, disorderly footsteps echoed from the shrubbery. A hand brushed aside the leaves—Gu Jin.

Xiao Chiye was immediately struck with foreboding.

Sure enough, Gu Jin's expression was grim as he dropped to one knee and whispered, "Master, the roads to the front line are entirely blocked! Hassen's elite forces are stationed just to the southeast; they've cut off access!"

Xiao Chiye's heart sank as it hit him.

He had walked into a trap.

Any skilled general knew the principle of imposing his will on the enemy without allowing the enemy to impose their will on him. Xiao Chiye had scored one victory after another since leaving Qudu by being the one to take the initiative. As the first mover, *he* controlled the pulse and rhythm of the battlefield without fear of being outnumbered. Yet he had forgotten Hassen was the same kind of commanding general as he was.

This fight in the rain was no coincidence. It was a meticulously planned round-up.

From the time Xiao Chiye's squad first rode north, Hassen had already laid a trap to hunt and kill a wolf pup. While Xiao Chiye had been watching the Biansha Horsemen, Hassen had also been observing him. Xiao Chiye thought he was taking the initiative, but he was merely paralyzing himself. The moment he made the call to head for Tudalung Banner, he had been forced into a passive position.

The thunder of horses' hooves rose in the distance.

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Chapter 152:
Hassen

RAINDROPS ROLLED down Hassen's scimitar, dripping along its sharp edge.

His horse snorted hot puffs of air. Hassen had been waiting a long time in the rain. It was getting late; the world had descended completely into darkness. Unlike the men of Great Zhou, who habitually wore their long hair in a neat topknot, Hassen had a head of short red hair that was gathered unceremoniously into a small tail at the back of his head.

After Huhelu's death, Bayim had been transferred to Hassen's troops. He tugged at the reins as he followed his new commander, wrapping up his treasured books of military strategy before tucking them back under his robe, pressed flat against his bosom. Cautiously he asked, "How are you so certain he won't escape?"

Hassen scratched at his rain-drenched hair, tangling it into a mess. "He was bold when he fought Huhelu. As those from Great Zhou say, he's skilled in the art of deception. He's the youngest son of the Prince of Libei—a wolf pup. If there's a chance to strike, he'll never choose to flee."

"He's bold indeed," Bayim said. "And cautious."

"Compared to his elder brother, Xiao Chiye is an impulsive man." Hassen grew a little embarrassed as he continued. "I'm no genius, but I know the pride of one. No matter how often he reminds himself to stay vigilant, he'll have lost some of his wariness after defeating our Huhelu at Third Sand Camp. His hunger is too strong, Bayim; even I can feel it. Like my father, he won't allow himself to cower and retreat. This is his strength, but it is also his weakness."

Bayim stroked his horse's neck. "Will we win?"

"We will assuredly win." Hassen's eyes were bright, and his words were powerful. "He can't beat me."

Hassen and Xiao Chiye had similar styles: The way they fought battles was wild and unrestrained. Qi Zhuyin and Lu Guangbai had both been put through the wringer at this man's hands. But he and Xiao Chiye were polar opposites in personality. Hassen was introverted and even a little bashful; all the beautiful maidens of the Twelve Tribes had their eyes on him, yet a single glance from them would make him go red in the face. He was Amur's favorite son, not only by dint of the formidable blood of his mother's clan but also his own character.

Xiao Fangxu preferred raising his little wolves free-range; he trained his sons with hard knocks until they howled in protest. Amur was the opposite. Before Hassen came of age, Amur had kept Hassen constantly by his side. He had personally taught Hassen how to fight in every one of his battles.

"You're also a genius," Bayim added as an afterthought.

Hassen shook his head and laughed aloud as he wiped his scimitar. "I'm not a genius, Bayim. I'm an ordinary man. I merely found my own path while battling geniuses. To be honest, before heading north, I worried over meeting Xiao Jiming here. Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin are the same kind of commander—they're more skilled at defense than offense. Do you understand? Not simple defense, mind you, but a kind that leaves you with no vulnerability to exploit and nowhere to turn; they're thorny opponents. Xiao Chiye isn't like that. He's…" Hassen struggled to find the appropriate description, then laughed instead. "I can't put my finger on it. He has plenty of shortcomings, and he isn't even trying to hide them."

"Then he's arrogant." Bayim nudged the horse over to Hassen's side. He raised a hand and lightly tapped Hassen's shoulder. "You're our new esuhuri, the eagle of the desert, and the future husband of Dorlan. You can be as humble as you like, Hassen. In our eyes, you're a genius bestowed upon the Hanma tribe by the gods. You're inferior to no one."

"Thank you," Hassen said. "My good friend, you should've come to my side earlier."

They exchanged smiles. A series of urgent whistles resounded through the night. Hassen raised his face to the sky, and though it was no

longer pouring as it had been during the day, a raindrop splashed between his brows. He gave his horse a pat, then looked west, past Tudalung Banner. “It’s time we haul in the net.”

Hassen’s elite forces hadn’t entered the fray at all; the men he had sent to engage Xiao Chiye were all regular troops originally stationed east of Tudalung Banner. He had deployed another group to the eastern mountain range, where they had a firm grip on Zhao Hui, preventing him from providing reinforcements. All paths to the front lines had been closed off; Hassen had turned the Tudalung Banner into an open sack and was only waiting to pull the cord closed around Xiao Chiye.

He had no way out. Hassen had long prepared an elite force here in the east that was rested and raring to fight. Even if Xiao Chiye escaped tonight, Hassen would ride him down. The wolf pup, with his back exposed and vulnerable, would become their prey.

This time, the sound of hooves was accompanied by torches that pressed in from the east. Exhausted, the Imperial Army had no choice but to fall back. Although the rain had let up, the temperature had plummeted. Even Tantai Hu huffed warm breath into his frozen hands.

Xiao Chiye trudged through the mud, the ragged breathing of his soldiers echoing behind him. They had to retreat to the marshland of Tudalung Banner as soon as possible. But Hassen wasn’t going to miss this chance. His elite forces had eaten their fill during the day; now, they spurred their horses onward, giving the Imperial Army no time at all to retreat. Xiao Chiye had split his men into several smaller groups and hid them among the shrubs and grasses, but Hassen’s scouts were meticulous, leaving no stone unturned.

Gu Jin’s keen ears quickly discerned more horses coming their way.

Xiao Chiye raised an arm to wipe his cheek and looked back into the ebony night. Torches flared to life on the horizon. Hassen’s riders were like a falcon circling ever lower. Now it spread its fiery wings and swooped down, screeching across the sky.

“Master,” Gu Jin said, leading his own horse out. “You should go!”

“Mount up and head north.” Xiao Chiye remained where he was. “Relay my orders along the way; tell the men to withdraw back to the marshland. Find Tantai Hu—tell him he’s not to stick around; he needs to retreat immediately.”

The Biansha Horsemen were closing in. Xiao Chiye could hear the sounds of horses snorting. When Gu Jin hesitated, Xiao Chiye spoke again with steady composure: “I have several hundred men here. We can fight as we retreat. We’ll regroup in the marshland.”

At this point, Gu Jin knew Xiao Chiye wouldn’t change his mind. He mounted his horse, and with a crack of his whip, charged into the night.

Hassen had already seen the horse that mattered. The riders whistled, as though hunting wild beasts in the desert. They didn’t rely on flags to convey messages. The whistle was taken up by others, echoing from the middle of their forces outward. On cue, both flanks wheeled their horses around to race toward the center, transforming the falcon with outspread wings into an arrow shooting straight for Xiao Chiye.

In war, speed was everything.

Hassen knew the consequences of hesitation. When it came to Xiao Chiye, he had to fight a quick battle. If he allowed his quarry to retreat to the marshland and catch his breath, Hassen very well might be facing another ambush.

“That’s him!” Bayim, just a step behind, pointed out a tall figure as he hollered in the Biansha tongue, “Xiao Chiye!”

Hassen drew his scimitar and bent low over his horse. Even without Bayim’s assistance, he had already recognized Xiao Chiye. The man’s height and appearance were far too conspicuous, and the way he looked as he pressed his lips together and glared was identical to Xiao Fangxu.

Wringing out the soaked strip of cloth, Xiao Chiye swiftly rewrapped it around his hand. He watched as the riders pressed in toward them, his attention entirely focused on Hassen’s fiery hair. He calculated the distance quietly. Just as Hassen’s horse reached the trip rope, Hassen suddenly

twisted sideways, leaned down from the saddle, and sliced through the rope hidden among the grass with one smooth slash.

The riders behind him dashed forward without obstruction.

The galloping horsemen brandished their scimitars, but Xiao Chiye didn't move. In the blink of an eye, the hooves of the Biansha horses sank into the concealed pitfalls, sending several men tumbling off their horses. The men in the lead crashed to the ground, but Hassen, who rode at the back, seemed to have anticipated this. He'd hung back just a beat to test the lay of the land.

Xiao Chiye raised a finger, and the Imperial Army jumped over the covering brush and broke into a dash.

Hassen's horse snorted steam as its rider whistled again. These hastily dug pitfalls were too shallow; the enemy leapt over them to continue their pursuit.

Their target was clear: Xiao Chiye. As long as Hassen killed Xiao Chiye, the scattered Imperial Army would be a mob without a leader. The grain wagons in the marshland of Tudalung Banner would be theirs for the taking.

As Xiao Chiye trudged through the mud, a horse was already drawing up alongside him. The Biansha soldier barked something at him in his native tongue. Xiao Chiye dove forward, ducking under the scimitar scything toward him, and landed steadily on the ground. He twisted and sliced through the Biansha Horseman's saddle. Frightened by the blade, the horse shied and stumbled. Xiao Chiye caught the arm of his pursuer; instead of hacking it off, he yanked hard. The rider tumbled off, sending up a spray of mud, as Xiao Chiye jumped onto the horse's back.

Sensing its change of master, the horse tossed its head wretchedly from side to side, dancing in place and refusing to run a step further. Hassen was pressing in close behind. Xiao Chiye squeezed hard with his legs and pulled on the reins, forcing the horse to barge ahead at an angle.

Hassen had been too eager in his pursuit of Xiao Chiye. Muddy water flew up as the two horses collided. Wolfsfang sliced through the air toward

Hassen's chest with such ferocity that he didn't dare be strategic, desperately parrying the blow with all his strength.

So heavy!

Hassen's arms sank under the force of the blow, the scimitar almost slipping from his hand. Realizing how extraordinary Xiao Chiye's arm strength was, he avoided the edge of Xiao Chiye's blade and refrained from meeting him head-on.

The riders behind them were gaining ground, clinging low to their horses' backs as they raced closer. The horse beneath Xiao Chiye stirred restlessly, and the pursuers' scimitars slashed at the horse's front knees. The horse screamed in pain as its legs buckled, collapsing into the mud.

Xiao Chiye rolled off the horse. He was surrounded.

The Biansha Horsemen had formed a loose ring around Xiao Chiye. One of the fleeing Imperial Army soldiers cursed aloud: "Fuck me, the supreme commander fell off!"

The stragglers from the Imperial Army who hadn't yet made it into the marsh promptly turned back, drew their blades, and charged into the horde of Biansha riders. They made quick use of the lesson: If they couldn't drag down the Biansha Horsemen and leap onto their mounts, they would hack the horses' legs and send the Biansha Horsemen plummeting to the ground. They remembered well what Xiao Chiye had said—the Biansha Horsemen were not skilled at close-quarters melee on foot.

But that was only true for the troops that crossed swords with the Libei Armored Cavalry in the north. Hassen had cut his teeth as a commander fighting battles with Great Zhou's finest infantry in the south. Lu Guangbai had clashed with him most often—and in fact, it was Lu Guangbai from whom all Xiao Chiye's knowledge of ambushing cavalries came. Hassen's elite forces weren't afraid of fighting on the ground. On the contrary, they were cool and determined as they faced the Imperial Army without their mounts. They needed no time to regroup; they lashed out again the instant they leapt to their feet.

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Fuck!

The Imperial Army, yet to suffer a defeat since leaving Qudu, sent up a collective curse. *These fuckers are stronger than us!*

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Chapter 153:
Defeat

THE IMPERIAL ARMY was similar to Xiao Chiye but much more slippery. There was a reason these soldiers gave the Libei Armored Cavalry complicated feelings. After the reign of Yongyi, their reputation had waned, and they had been reduced to mere ornaments in Qudu. Even their original patrol duties had been snatched away by the Eight Great Battalions. In the years that followed, they'd been relegated to odd jobs and idle errands without much protest, as if they were more than happy to drift their way through life. But since Xiao Chiye had taken charge, it was as if they'd been dusted off, finally able to shine in full glory in Qudu.

Unlike the Libei Armored Cavalry and the Qidong Garrison Troops, the Imperial Army could disregard all other concerns and focus their attention solely on Xiao Chiye. Any criticism of their commander fell on deaf ears. So long as Xiao Chiye waved his hand and gave the signal, they were willing to follow him to hell and back. This was a brew of loyalty blended with the blood of brotherhood.

The present moment was a prime example. The enemy undeniably outnumbered them, yet the Imperial Army felt no fear. They hacked at the legs of the enemy vanguard's horses to create an opening in Hassen's encirclement. But more troops followed, numerous and highly adaptable. Before Hassen gave a single command, they had already seen through the Imperial Army's intentions.

Seeing the Imperial Army taking aim at the horses, the Biansha Horsemen dismounted and charged in on foot. They wore no armor, and the furs they favored were light while repelling the chill; they moved with preternatural agility. Unlike Huhelu's squad, Hassen's men each had a spare scimitar tied to their saddles and slender pike daggers secured to the outside of their thighs. If they damaged their scimitars, they could grab their spare or draw their daggers for close-quarters combat.

They were a highly disciplined force.

Xiao Chiye panted as he swept fierce eyes over the elite force arrayed before them.

All this time, Hassen hadn't said a word. He had no need to intimidate or negotiate with Xiao Chiye, nor any desire to use him to threaten Xiao Fangxu. Leaving Xiao Chiye alive would open the door to future trouble. Xiao Chiye had to die. Tonight.

Hassen locked eyes with his opponent. He gripped his scimitar with one hand and released the reins, then leapt off his horse and landed lightly in the mud. They were like beasts facing off in the night, their mutual abhorrence mixed with the stench of blood. Hassen approached steadily, wading through the muddy water without taking his eyes off Xiao Chiye.

Sporadic raindrops splashed down from the dark sky onto the back of Xiao Chiye's hand as he gripped Wolfsfang and watched Hassen draw closer.

The silence was uncanny. The cacophony of battle was everywhere around them, yet Xiao Chiye found it quiet—so quiet it raised the hair on the back of his neck. It took everything he had to hold himself in check, suppressing that seething, murderous intent from rising up and overwhelming him.

Hassen paused, as if he'd noticed Xiao Chiye's impatience. They were both fighting for control of the battlefield, attempting to influence its very atmosphere. Coexistence was impossible: Both craved absolute authority over the rhythm of this fight.

A drop of moisture slid along the tensed muscle on the back of Xiao Chiye's hand. The moment it fell, Hassen burst into action. His red hair was a dancing torch in the darkness as he parted the mud underfoot, sprinting straight for Xiao Chiye.

In a blink, Hassen's scimitar was slicing toward Xiao Chiye's throat. Xiao Chiye took a quick step back, the sludge fanning up behind him. He swung Wolfsfang in a half-arc, and the two blades collided. Hassen skidded backward from the impact but regained his footing almost immediately and lunged into action again, having cleverly learned to dodge this particular blade.

Wolfsfang was a heavy executioner's blade and relied on its wielder's extraordinary arm strength. Every move Hassen made was executed with the intention of hacking off Xiao Chiye's arm. Each time Xiao Chiye swung his blade, he struck empty air. Even when he caught up with Hassen, Hassen merely angled his scimitar and brushed past to avoid taking the brunt of Xiao Chiye's terrifying strength. As they fought, more attackers snuck up behind Xiao Chiye. He was pushing his senses to the limit, but his strength was depleting rapidly, like water pouring from a pierced vessel; in less than an hour, Xiao Chiye felt his own movements slowing. Hassen lunged again; at the same instant, Xiao Chiye felt a gust of wind at his back. He sidestepped to dodge a scimitar behind him, then grabbed the arm of the man wielding it. Spinning, he knocked Hassen to the ground with a kick as he snapped the arm of his second attacker. Another scimitar cleaved down on Xiao Chiye's arm from a new direction. There was a loud *clang* as the blade met the armguard Shen Zechuan had gifted him.

The slurry of mud erupted like the shrapnel from an explosion as more Biansha Horsemen brought their scimitars down against Wolfsfang. Xiao Chiye punched one of them into the mud with his free hand. The pressure on Wolfsfang subsided, and Xiao Chiye crouched to support the lift of the blade. Hassen's scimitar had chipped from Wolfsfang's impact. He dropped it and drew the pike daggers from the straps on his thighs, waiting for an opening. Just as he sprang forward, an Imperial Army soldier tackled Hassen around his waist.

The soldier used his best wrestling technique but failed to trip Hassen. Hassen flipped the dagger and slid it along the man's armor, plunging it viciously into the side of his neck. Blood spurted like a mountain spring. Yet Hassen hadn't even pulled the dagger out when he had to turn his head to dodge Xiao Chiye's blade.

Men were dying on both sides. The Imperial Army hadn't been prepared for Hassen's elite force to be this formidable. Likewise, Hassen's cavalry hadn't expected the Imperial Army to put up such a fight.

The Biansha Horsemen at the periphery produced iron chains with small copper balls attached to the ends. They were similar in appearance to those used by the Libei Armored Cavalry, but much lighter. They inched

closer, tightening the encirclement. The next time Xiao Chiye's Wolfsfang faltered, countless chains shot toward him. The copper balls wrapped around every one of Xiao Chiye's limbs. With their prey firmly caught in the web, the horsemen yanked him onto the muddy ground.

Hassen's dagger whistled toward Xiao Chiye's face. It took practically all his strength to drag his chain-wrapped arms up to parry the blow; the Biansha Horsemen at the other end of the chains all stumbled in unison.

Once again, the dagger slammed into the armguard with a *clang*. Even a piece of top-quality iron like this one couldn't withstand the successive blows. Xiao Chiye felt the dog-hide string snap, the armguard dented beyond repair.

He fought against the chains, but there were simply too many. He tilted his head to spit out the mud and sand in his mouth, watching the scimitars slice toward his throat. He saw the billowing black sky. The winds of the Hongyan Mountains tousled his rain-drenched hair, and between ragged gasps, he thought of Shen Zechuan.

Victory was within Hassen's grasp—but he never expected Xiao Chiye to resist the combined force of so many trying to hold him down.

Xiao Chiye raised both legs and kicked over a blade-wielding Biansha soldier. The iron chains securing him swung violently. It was impossible to tell if it was sweat or muddy water that trickled along his temples; blue veins protruded as Xiao Chiye flipped himself up and landed on his feet. But one person alone could not salvage the situation, just as a single log couldn't support a collapsing building. The instant Xiao Chiye found his balance, the soldiers yanked the chains taut. He was once again dragged to the ground.

Even if he'd been blessed with wings, escape would be impossible tonight.

Below him, the ground started to quake. Water droplets clinging to the shrubs and branches jumped as the call of a war horn reverberated through the boundless night.

Hassen looked southward; he was scarcely surprised to see a figure in dark armor charging toward them at a thunderous speed. A black tide followed at his heels, engulfing everything in its path under the crushing darkness of the night. The closer they came, the more aggressively the ground jolted under that roar of hooves—a testament to the heavy weight of their steel armor.

Hassen whistled. Immediately, his men swung astride their horses and withdrew northward in an orderly fashion. Before he turned his own horse, Hassen glanced toward Xiao Chiye once more with regret. He raised two fingers, tapped his temple, and inclined his head, as if to bid him a polite farewell. He put his heels to his horse and sped away, leaving a scene of devastation in his wake.

The black-armored rider galloped to Xiao Chiye's side, making a tight circle around him before removing his helmet. Xiao Fangxu looked askance at Xiao Chiye, then commanded those behind him: "Untie your second young master. How unsightly."

The expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes was bitterly cold and grave—it was the shame of his first taste of defeat.

First Sand Camp was divided into five divisions commanded by five generals, all of whom reported to Xiao Fangxu. In military terms, Xiao Chiye not only ranked below all of them, but had been pathetically defeated. As he squatted outside the tent to rinse his upper body with cold water, the commanding generals all glanced at him as they came and went.

Xiao Chiye didn't seem to feel the blade wounds on his shoulders, chest, and back as the frigid water washed his body pale. When the meeting inside the tent adjourned, Zuo Qianqiu lifted the flap. Spotting Xiao Chiye hunched nearby with his back to them all, his intended reproach disappeared beneath bemusement and sympathy. He called out, "Come in and drink a bowl of warm milk. It's freezing out; can't have you falling sick."

Mumbling an answer, Xiao Chiye rose to return the water bucket before stepping into the tent.

A fire was crackling inside. Xiao Chiye's armor had been so badly damaged it could no longer be worn. Xiao Fangxu was presently examining the dent in the steel of his armguard. Zuo Qianqiu had called for a medic to dress Xiao Chiye's wounds, so Xiao Chiye sat bare-chested on a little stool and held himself still.

A short time later, Chen Yang, Gu Jin, Tantai Hu, and Wu Ziyu filed in.

Xiao Fangxu tossed the armguard onto the table, settled himself in the commander's seat, and addressed Chen Yang. "Give your general a report of the casualties."

"The Imperial Army lost three hundred men," Chen Yang began quietly.

"Louder." Xiao Fangxu fixed his gaze on Chen Yang. "Why are you hanging your head?"

Chen Yang raised his voice. "The Imperial Army lost three hundred men. Thirty-six sustained severe injuries, and eight had minor injuries."

Xiao Chiye's roots lay in the Imperial Army. He was responsible for every one of its casualties, fatal or otherwise. This army, so far from its origins, could not be further expanded; it was a distinctive force. Should this force be wiped out, there was no way to rebuild it in Libei. With every defeat the Imperial Army suffered in battle, its losses were exponential. Three hundred soldiers were a drop in the bucket to the Qidong Garrison Troops or the Libei Armored Cavalry, but they were a heavy blow to the Imperial Army.

Silence fell over the tent. Tantai Hu snuck a few glances at Chen Yang and Gu Jin before finally plucking up his courage to speak. "Hassen caught us off guard. Master was also—"

"Now report the casualties of the Three Great Battalions of Liuyang to your general," Xiao Fangxu ordered as if he hadn't heard.

Chen Yang paused, then said, "The Liuyang Battalions dispatched along the southern route lost eight hundred ninety-two men. Forty-five

sustained heavy injuries, and two hundred thirty-seven suffered light injuries."

"Zhao Hui has been fighting on the northern route; he assembled this squad at the last minute to aid your Imperial Army. The group numbered two thousand in total. They were ambushed by the cavalry Hassen stationed along their route while digging out the collapsed bridle path. Almost half of them died there. If you had stayed where you were," Xiao Fangxu continued, "you would've met them in just under four hours. But you impulsively turned around and made for Tudalung Banner. How are you going to account for this loss to Zhao Hui?"

Xiao Chiye was silent.

"You are the commanding general in charge of the transportation of supplies—*not* a commanding general who rides into combat. To think you'd launch an assault on Hassen's squad with only a few hundred men… Did a donkey kick you in the head, Xiao Chiye?"

It wasn't Zuo Qianqiu's place to speak. But Xiao Chiye had just come off the battlefield; as his shifu, he couldn't help but feel bad for his disciple. "Hassen's been planning this for a long time, and they didn't anticipate the storm. It was an urgent situation. A-Ye—"

"You don't see the Libei Armored Cavalry as your responsibility at all. In your eyes, there's only the Imperial Army." Bracing his hand on his knees, Xiao Fangxu leaned forward, his voice suddenly frigid. "The earlier victory went to your head; now you think every opponent is like Huhelu. Your loss to Hassen today is the consequence. What possessed you to think you could fight him head-on? Raise your head!"

Wu Ziyu couldn't bear it any longer and dropped to his knees with a *thud*. Once he was down, Tantai Hu cluelessly followed. Two more thuds followed; Chen Yang and Gu Jin had knelt too.

Xiao Fangxu turned to level his gaze on them.

"Your Lordship…" Wu Ziyu said weakly. "I—it's just…my legs suddenly gave out."

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Chapter 154:
A Man

XIAO CHIYE'S PRIVATE SCOLDING would be followed by public discipline the next day. He had been demoted below the rank of primary commander. So what if he was an extraordinary prodigy? Even he had to swallow his pride after suffering a defeat. It was said one should never brag in a war zone about battles once fought or enemies once vanquished—none of that mattered. Xiao Chiye had slain Huhelu at Third Sand Camp, something that had been the subject of intense discussion in the army. But Xiao Fangxu hadn't rewarded him; instead, he'd made his son the general in charge of the military supplies. Perhaps others hadn't understood this move, but the older generals had seen it at once: Xiao Fangxu planned to entrust his son with heavy responsibilities.

Xiao Fangxu had chosen not to reward Xiao Chiye because he wanted to quiet the dissenting voices whispering behind their backs—he wanted to prove he was even harsher and more exacting on his son than on others. Although Guo Weili had won few victories against Huhelu the whole time he'd fought him in Tudalung Banner, Xiao Fangxu promoted him and transferred his troops to Third Sand Camp to take up command. Upon seeing such a stark contrast in treatment, anyone with a brain would know to shut up. It signaled that any promotion Xiao Chiye received in the future would be based on genuine military achievement—and it also left Xiao Chiye room for defeat.

It wasn't that Libei could not afford to lose a battle. Xiao Jiming could lose, Guo Weili could, and so could Zhao Hui. But these were all generals familiar to Libei. Their defeats were pardonable; Xiao Chiye didn't have the luxury of such forgiveness. Once he truly came to stand at the forefront of the war, he could only win. He had to prove to the dispirited armored cavalry that there was no other candidate for Libei.

Xiao Chiye walked out of the main tent and put on his clothes. His lower back and torso were swathed in bandages, but his right arm had

sustained the worst injury. He wouldn’t be able to draw the Conqueror Bow for some time; he’d even have to exercise caution wielding Wolfsfang.

He huffed out a few clouds of hot air and whistled for Snowcrest. The horse had just been brushed down and had yet to be saddled. Xiao Chiye vaulted atop its back and gave it a pat on the neck, then leaned down to whisper a few words into the animal’s ear. Snowcrest turned and obediently galloped away into the night.

“He’s still just the same.” Zuo Qianqiu lamented at the entrance of the tent. “Every time he’s feeling down, he goes riding.”

“He’s seething.” Xiao Fangxu lifted the pot of boiling tea. “His six years in Qudu weren’t in vain. If this was before, I wouldn’t put it past him to fling aside the tent flap and storm off when I scolded him the second time. No one can beat those old foxes in Qudu when it comes to tempering a man.”

“We shouldn’t pin all the blame for this loss on him.” Zuo Qianqiu looked back at the Prince of Libei. “Hassen took great care setting that trap in Tudalung Banner; if it had been either of us, even we might not have escaped unscathed.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘if’ in war. It was *his* battle, and the outcome is his to bear, win or lose.” Xiao Fangxu paused. “There was no question that the battle would be a loss. But I’m happy he dared to turn back to the marshlands of Tudalung Banner to outflank them and fight.”

“Right?” Zuo Qianqiu laughed and pointed a finger at Xiao Fangxu. “It’s just like you to say one thing and mean another.”

“I can’t praise him,” Xiao Fangxu said, rotating his teacup.

“You never held back your praise for Jiming.”

“It’s different.” Xiao Fangxu turned to face him. “Jiming takes after his mother. After his little brother came along, he heard everyone say how much A-Ye resembled his father, as if he’d snatched A-Ye’s place by being born a few years earlier. Because of this, I must praise Jiming often.

“A-Ye takes after me,” he continued. “What’s more, he’s the baby of the family. With Jiming shielding him, he’s always done whatever he

pleased. He was thirteen when he almost broke his neck falling off his horse trying to tame it, and the moment he recovered, he carried on even if he had to sneak out to do it. When he was fourteen, he fought a beautifully executed battle—there wasn't a person who didn't praise him when he returned to the homeland. Back then, he wouldn't let anyone give him what he wanted; he had to obtain it on his own, even if he starved, even if he thirsted. With a personality like that, what he lacks is not praise, but criticism."

"Being a father is a skill; I can't compare to you." Zuo Qianqiu's wife had died young. After the battle of Tianfei Watchtower, he had wandered all over Great Zhou and never remarried. He had no children. He sat down and continued, "But there has been no lack of talented men from Biansha in recent years. Amur has a formidable son too. Hassen is neither arrogant nor rash, and he's decisive and straightforward in his moves."

"Amur has a good eye." Xiao Fangxu took a sip of hot tea. "The most impressive thing about Hassen is he doesn't confine himself to one style of combat, yet his character is steady."

"If Jiming were deployed here," Zuo Qianqiu said, "he could probably hold him in check."

"Maybe so." Xiao Fangxu shifted his feet slightly. "Zhao Hui's combat style bears the closest resemblance to Jiming's; Zhao Hui learned from him, after all. But back when Hassen fought Qidong, he faced Qi Zhuyin, whose tactical sense is similar to Jiming's—Hassen is accustomed to that kind of rhythm. Look at Zhao Hui. He was able to contain Hassen's onslaught, yes. But he was pinned down by Hassen on the northern route all the same."

Zuo Qianqiu laughed. "But when Hassen faced A-Ye, it was one fearsome force against another. If their numbers were equally matched, I think both sides would have suffered comparable losses."

"Don't flatter him. He's no match for Hassen as he is. Hassen has been on the battlefield even longer than Jiming, and experience is far more formidable than natural talent. A-Ye is still at a great disadvantage." Xiao

Fangxu stood, spinning a dagger between his fingers as he stared at the woven straw target across from him. “The wolf pup can’t win.”

Zuo Qianqiu clasped his hands behind his back and said, placid, “General in charge of military supplies is a good post. Once he has a thorough grasp of his duties, he’ll know all of Libei’s major and minor military routes, the strengths and weaknesses of the various camps, and even the personalities of the generals commanding them like the back of his hand.”

Xiao Fangxu threw the dagger with a quick flick of his wrist; it buried itself in the bullseye. He looked back at Zuo Qianqiu and laughed smugly. “I’m going to send Amur a gift. Let’s give him a taste of what I can do.”

Xiao Chiye returned near dawn. Chen Yang came forward to hand him a handkerchief as he dismounted. Xiao Chiye wiped the sweat on his neck and spied Xiao Fangxu standing a short distance away, beckoning him over. He considered pretending not to see him.

Not to be denied, Xiao Fangxu strode over and looped an arm around Xiao Chiye’s neck, forcing Xiao Chiye to bend down, then tousled Xiao Chiye’s hair until it was a mess.

“Where’s my falcon?” Xiao Chiye extricated himself with difficulty and rubbed at his neck. “Don’t feed it raw meat.”

“It’s your falcon; what are you asking me for?” Xiao Fangxu took a few steps forward. Seeing that Xiao Chiye was still unhappy, he turned and lifted a leg to kick him.

Xiao Chiye leapt away. “I’m just asking!”

Xiao Fangxu ignored him and stroked Snowcrest. “We had a new herd of horses back home last year. There’s one with coloring just the reverse of this one. White with a black patch on its chest; a real beauty.”

“Oh,” said Xiao Chiye, guessing his intent. “Are you giving it to me?”

Xiao Fangxu slanted him a look. “Giving it to you? Your elder sister-in-law is putting it aside for your wife.”

Xiao Chiye trained his eyes on the Hongyan Mountains behind him and said nothing.

“That’s a nice armguard.” Xiao Fangxu stepped up on the wooden fence and took a seat. When Xiao Chiye looked back, his father craned his neck, peering at Xiao Chiye’s expression. “Where was it forged? It’s not in Qidong’s style.”

“Of course it’s nice.” Xiao Chiye turned away and said, as if telling a secret, “That’s my protective charm.”

Xiao Fangxu hummed but didn’t let up. “Where’s this girl from? Don’t tell me you left her in Border Camp. It’s full of stinky men. How old is she?”

“Stinky men?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Xiao Fangxu looked on quizzically as Xiao Chiye took a few steps back. Xiao Fangxu narrowed his eyes. “Don’t tell me you brought back a girl from the Hua Clan?”

Xiao Chiye continued to retreat. At his father’s puzzled expression, he let out an inexplicable laugh. He removed Wolfsfang and tossed it aside.

“Xiao Chiye.” Xiao Fangxu sensed something amiss. “’Fess up.”

Xiao Chiye suddenly raised his voice: “It’s a stinky man!”

“Huh?” Xiao Fangxu cocked his head, thinking he’d misheard.

“I’m bringing home a man!” Sunlight shone on Xiao Chiye’s face, dispelling the dark clouds of yesterday. He was a perfect little rascal as he taunted, “The best-looking man in all of Great Zhou is my wife!”

After making this proclamation, he didn’t even wait for Xiao Fangxu’s reaction before turning around and taking to his heels.

Xiao Fangxu lapsed into silence. Chen Yang swallowed nervously. Suddenly he saw Xiao Fangxu leap off the fence, half-falling over himself as he landed.

Chen Yang called out, “My lord—”

“Xiao Chiye!” Xiao Fangxu let out an earth-shaking roar. He pushed himself off the ground to chase after his son, but stopped after a few steps, knowing he couldn’t catch up. In a fit of anger, he picked up a piece of dried horse dung and flung it after him, cussing, “Get your ass back here and make yourself clear!”

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Chapter 155:
Negotiations

XIAO CHIYE was not only scolded, he received a few harsh thumps from his father as well. But he'd been thinking it over for a long time and didn't want to hide it from his family. Later, he stood inside the main tent to accept his official punishment of demotion. Before the commanding generals withdrew, they snuck a glance at the prince and were surprised to find him even angrier than before.

Zuo Qianqiu studied the armguard, turning it over and over in his hands, then gave Xiao Fangxu a slight thumbs-up. "I certainly can't tell anything from this."

Xiao Fangxu stood at the other end of the tent with his back to his son. "You think I don't know what kind of armguard he uses? It'd be boiled dog hide at most. He thinks his skin is thick enough; he'd never put thought into something like this."

Zuo Qianqiu was also put on the spot as he glanced at Xiao Chiye and said hesitantly, "Why didn't you mention this to us when you were in Qudu? Come, tell Shifu about him, so we can…prepare ourselves a little."

"Prepare, my ass." Xiao Fangxu looked back. "He had it all figured out; he was just waiting for me to take the bait!"

"You'll have to meet him sooner or later." Xiao Chiye accepted the rebuke with his hands behind his back. "I'll do everything properly. I want to take him home to see Mom this year."

"You have the whole thing arranged already, huh." Xiao Fangxu's words were loaded with sarcasm. "Maybe I should start calling *you* Old Man."

Xiao Chiye didn't dare reply.

"Where's he from?" Zuo Qianqiu set down the armguard. "Qudu?"

Xiao Chiye answered honestly, "Zhongbo."

“That’s not too bad; it’s close by,” Zuo Qianqiu commented to Xiao Fangxu. He followed up with another question: “How old?”

“Twenty-one. Pretty young.”

Zuo Qianqiu found this description oddly familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on why. He continued his questioning. “This armguard of yours is well-made. Is he a craftsman or armorer?”

“No.”

Xiao Fangxu sneered. “Do you dare repeat what you said outside to your shifu?”

Turning aside, Xiao Chiye gave a slight cough.

“I demoted you, so you stabbed me in the heart!” Xiao Fangxu cried.

Xiao Chiye found these words uncomfortably familiar. Not falling for it, he said, “I didn’t. I wouldn’t dare.”

Zuo Qianqiu was still caught up in wondering what kind of person this young man was. “What’s his name, then? Is he from a clan we’re familiar with?”

“Yes.” Xiao Chiye paused for a moment, then answered, “His name is Shen Zechuan.”

Several days later, Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai arrived at Luoxia Pass to discuss a long-term partnership on behalf of Cizhou, though both parties had more or less already reached an agreement through their written correspondences. In addition, they requested direct passage through, hoping to arrive at Huaizhou before the end of the eighth month.

The eighth month had only just begun when the commander of Fanzhou’s garrison troops revolted, intending to proclaim himself king of the prefecture. He deployed troops to seize Dengzhou first, planning to use the opportunity to threaten Cizhou. To top it off, he wrote to Zhou Gui and demanded that Cizhou hand the grain they sold to Chazhou over to them instead, claiming it as a loan.

Shen Zechuan, of course, ignored him. He instructed Zhou Gui to draft an official denunciation as well as a declaration that he would suppress any bandits in the region, then had it dispatched to Chazhou. Slapping the label of “bandit” on all armed groups in Zhongbo with the important exception of himself, he declared Cizhou’s intention to join forces with Chazhou to eradicate these outlaws. The self-styled “King Yi” of Fanzhou naturally refused to accept this, and the two parties hurled abuse at each other from afar. Their respective advisors traded letters conveying rude greetings to each other’s ancestors, sparing no effort to make the other side out as treacherous rebels while painting themselves as a reluctant militia revolting against corrupt forces for the sake of the common man.

Throughout the standoff, Shen Zechuan was never idle. Time was precious. Between the exchange of abuses, he ordered the Cizhou prefectural yamen to start repairing the roads and relay stations leading to the other prefectures. This was no small undertaking, and would likely only be completed by the end of the year. At the same time, Cizhou’s garrison troops pushed ahead with their training; the prefecture was now expanding at full speed.

“Apart from what’s needed to buy grain from Huaizhou,” Zhou Gui explained when they met in his study, “the profits from the sale of grain this year will be enough to repair the roads. But the prefectural yamen will have less grain to distribute to those in need. Winter is coming; I don’t have the heart to turn away the migrants, and they’re increasing every day.” He produced a slim book and presented it to Shen Zechuan. “Now that the weather’s getting colder, most of the new migrants are coming from Dancheng.”

“Speaking of migrants from Dancheng.” Taking hold of the book, Shen Zechuan turned to Yao Wenyu. “Yuanzhuo came through Dancheng; he knows more about the situation there than us. Why are so many people leaving their homes?”

Tugging on the coat draped over his shoulders, Yao Wenyu answered gravely, “After the late emperor passed, Han Cheng tried to convince the empress dowager to create more official positions for the descendants of the noble clans. Essentially, they hoped to raise these noble sons using the

funds of the state treasury. The list comprised over ten thousand people. Obviously, the empress dowager didn't agree. To shore up their strength, the noble clans became even more aggressive in seizing the commoners' fields. They under-reported acreages, keeping vast expanses of fertile farmland off the books. Not only did this leave the common people without fields to farm, they still had to pay a head tax for every family member. Many of them couldn't make a living, so they fled."

"According to the law, once their household registration is confirmed, those who leave without appropriate documentation from local authorities can be arrested and drafted into the army—or worse, executed." Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "If they hope to escape the authorities in Dancheng, fleeing to Zhongbo is the best option. But even Cizhou has a limited capacity. Relying on the yamen to give out free grain isn't viable in the long run. We simply can't afford to feed this many mouths."

And that wasn't the only problem. A portion of the migrants who had come to Cizhou had gotten used to getting their meals for nothing. They made excuses to avoid registering themselves with the authorities, instead maintaining the status of migrant in order to freeload off the city and idle their lives away outside the prefectural yamen.

"I made a special point of asking the census officials at the yamen," Zhou Gui supplied. "There are many young and strong people among these folks who loiter on the streets stirring up trouble. There was good public order in the city before the seventh month, but since the beginning of the eighth, theft has become increasingly common. When the constables arrest them and march them to jail, they make a huge scene." Zhou Gui fretted, heavy with worries. "But after they learned they could still fill their stomachs even in jail, they became more brazen. Alas!"

Shen Zechuan had already come to a decision on this matter. "Their dauntless behavior is enabled by Cizhou's accommodating and magnanimous treatment toward migrants and lack of relevant penalties established; Cizhou has continued treating them as local citizens of decent origins. But times are different now. Today, I'd like to ask you to draft a document strictly forbidding migrants from delaying their registration. By the middle of the eighth month at the very latest, anyone who has not

registered themselves at the prefectural yamen will be driven out without exception. That's not all; you will put up notices everywhere tomorrow and assign clerks to explain. Make sure to clarify to the commoners who cannot read so they know what is at stake. Starting the day after tomorrow, any violators and offenders shall be dealt with severely, without mercy."

Shen Zechuan had always used a gentle touch since arriving in Cizhou, and he always appeared amicable and easygoing to outsiders. He never flaunted his talents openly, even during the thorny negotiation of the Chazhou grain deal. This order was a clear departure from his usual style; suddenly, he appeared swift and decisive.

"But…" Zhou Gui began. "Won't we lose the support of the people if the punishments are too severe? After all, it was only a few months ago that Cizhou started accepting the migrants with open arms."

"These are two separate matters." Yao Wenyu had timed his support perfectly. "Cizhou welcomes those in need out of compassion—but if we let our authority be undermined because of this, we'll be sabotaging ourselves. As they say, before dealing with external foes, one must first resolve internal conflicts. Cizhou must eradicate these threats at home as soon as possible; otherwise, they will burden us in the future."

"Fanzhou already has a King Yi." Shen Zechuan set the book down. "He wants to establish a miniature imperial court southeast of Cizhou. He's assembled troops from Fanzhou and Dengzhou, and he's positioning them to attack Cizhou so he can turn us into his personal granary. Next year, the situation will be more chaotic. We can't afford to make any more concessions for the sake of benevolence."

"Besides, this is a good thing," Yao Wenyu told Zhou Gui. "Repairing the roads and relay stations requires manpower we don't have; the migrants can fill these vacancies in Cizhou. If the yamen distributes grain to them in accordance with work done, they'll have both work to occupy their hands and food to fill their stomachs. They'll no longer go around stirring up trouble."

Zhou Gui nodded. "Once the household registration is complete, the yamen will have an exact head count of the people in Cizhou. If we start

surveying fields at the end of the eighth month, we should be able to finish dividing the farmlands before spring. As long as we encounter no natural disaster next year, Cizhou's granary will remain full."

"And this is only the first year." Shen Zechuan was in a good mood. "Chazhou will also be on the agenda next year. We should also prepare to open up a new road northwest, to Luoxia Pass and Huaizhou."

"Isn't Libei letting us use their roads?" Zhou Gui asked, taken aback.

"They are. But in the long run, we'll still have to remunerate Luoxia Pass for their use," Shen Zechuan said. "The pass is directly north of Quancheng; they are allies we need to befriend. Once the trade route begins to thrive and benefits the surrounding regions, the present roads will be insufficient. What's more, the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds will become the Imperial Army's permanent encampment, so establishing roads for their use is imperative."

"There's also the issue of army provisions for the other regions in early spring next year." The weather had taken a turn, and Yao Wenyu's legs were aching, but he looked as composed as ever. "Firstly, Qidong is the biggest threat south of Zhongbo. This year, they were affected by the late emperor's assassination and Lu Guangbai's desertion; they didn't manage to send troops to Zhongbo. But now the marriage alliance between Hua and Qi is sealed. If they have sufficient provisions this spring, we can expect them to send troops north to crush us. As for Libei, now that it's broken free of Qudu's control, they no longer have access to Juexi's granaries via the Northeast Provisions Trail. Libei shares a common lot with us, and they're shouldering the burden of driving back Biansha in the north; the issue of provisions for them must be resolved before spring as well."

The rest of Zhou Gui's advisors held their discussion in a partitioned area of the study, separated from Shen Zechuan and the prefect by a folding screen. As they spent most of their time shut up indoors, and with so many pipe smokers among them, the study grew stuffier the longer they sat.

Calling out to Qiao Tianya, Shen Zechuan said, "Help Yuanzhuo out for some fresh air."

Yao Wenyu inclined his head in a slight bow to Shen Zechuan from his wheelchair and let Qiao Tianya push him out. Shen Zechuan instructed Zhou Gui to open the windows and let the advisors in the partitioned area take a break. Leaving the turbid air of the room behind, Shen Zechuan too headed out into the chill wind.

Cizhou had entered its rainy season. Sunny days were few and far between, and the weather was bitterly cold. Ji Gang, worried Shen Zechuan would fall ill again, was particularly cautious with his health and watched him every day to ensure he put on extra layers. He'd tasked Fei Sheng with following him around whenever he headed out.

The moment Fei Sheng saw Shen Zechuan step into the wind, he went over to hand him a coat. Shen Zechuan draped it over his shoulders and strolled down the covered walkway. The flowers of the pagoda trees in this courtyard had long withered, and the leaves on the branches had fallen, leaving bare trees set against a backdrop of gloomy skies, a picture of desolation.

Thinking to amuse him, Fei Sheng said, "Master, there's a copper basin in the Zhou manor that's the spitting image of ours. There are a few brocade carp in it, and Mister Yao's cat was so hungry watching them it was spinning in circles."

Shen Zechuan glanced over. "That's because the one in our residence was a housewarming gift from Madam Zhou."

He felt a little chilly standing there, but the cold had cleared his head. Seeing it was about time, he drifted back under the eaves of the study. Qiao Tianya and Yao Wenyu had yet to return, so he waited a while longer. Eventually, Zhou Gui rushed over, gesturing for Shen Zechuan to enter.

Evening was fast approaching, and they would soon retire. The advisors would work through the night drafting the new documents, and Shen Zechuan would need to wake at the crack of dawn the next morning to return and review the finer details with everyone. It would be a race against time to get the notice up before midday the day after tomorrow.

"Once winter comes, we'll need to take advantage of Libei's trade market." Shen Zechuan stood by the door, conversing with Zhou Gui.

“We’ll negotiate with the Yan Clan if we can, but if we can’t, forget it. When the time comes, we can take a longer route to Juexi from Huaizhou. Although it’s a fair distance, perhaps we can think of a way to use the Hua Clan’s waterways in Dicheng. The army provisions will also—”

Shen Zechuan broke off when he saw Ding Tao enter from the courtyard entrance and leap over the railings in a few strides. He signaled for Ding Tao to speak.

Ding Tao’s cheeks were flushed pink as he exclaimed, “Gongzi, the heir consort is here!”

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Chapter 156:
Sister-in-Law

THE HEIR CONSORT, Lu Yizhi, was Xiao Jiming's childhood sweetheart, and the two had gone on to live in conjugal bliss after their marriage. She was renowned in Libei for her virtues. When the princess consort of Libei had passed away from illness, Xiao Chiye had still been an ignorant brat. As the saying went, an elder sister-in-law was comparable to a mother—and that was precisely what Lu Yizhi had become to Xiao Chiye. Aside from being Lu Guangbai's younger sister, she was also Qi Zhuyin's bosom friend.

The carriage, accompanied by soldiers of the Libei Armored Cavalry on both sides of the public road, rolled to a stop outside the city walls of Cizhou. Lu Yizhi sat within and listened to the sound of approaching footsteps beyond the curtain. Someone called out, "Vice Commander."

Vice Commander.

Lu Yizhi clasped her hands and thought in delight, *That's him!*

Zhou Gui stood outside the carriage and bowed respectfully. "Greetings to Your Ladyship. It must have been a long and arduous journey. Please, come into the city at once."

Lu Yizhi had never met Zhou Gui, and naturally had never heard his voice. At that call of *Vice Commander*, she took Zhou Gui to be Shen Zechuan. The carriage drove toward the city gate, and as the wheels crunched over the gravel, she quietly lifted a corner of the window curtain and caught a glimpse of Zhou Gui's back.

Zhou Gui was facing away from her, so Lu Yizhi couldn't see his face. But she thought Shen Zechuan was rather different from how Xiao Chiye had described him in his letter. She let the curtain fall, then, after a moment, lifted it again.

This time, she saw Zhou Gui's face. He was much older than even Xiao Jiming, of average stature, and had a lean face with a trim beard to

match. Lu Yizhi was so stunned her mouth fell open. Fortunately, she still had her wits about her and remembered Shen Zechuan was supposed to be two years younger than Xiao Chiye.

Just then, Zhou Gui bowed and moved over slightly to make way for a figure in white. This person was tall and slender. Although he was largely facing away from the carriage, she caught a glimpse of his visage. Lu Yizhi observed carefully and reflected that A-Ye truly hadn't been bragging; he was indeed awfully good-looking. She could only presume he took after his mother.

Unaware that Lu Yizhi was studying him, Shen Zechuan spoke to Zhou Gui in hushed tones. "I'd like to ask the advisors to draft the new document today. All other matters can be postponed."

As obtuse as Zhou Gui might be at times, he was under no illusions about whom Lu Yizhi was here to see. He kept pace with Shen Zechuan as he walked. "I'll deploy some men from the yamen to the vice commander's manor."

Shen Zechuan blinked in surprise. "Whatever for?"

Zhou Gui's palms were sweating as he answered, "To protect you!"

Speechless, Shen Zechuan ran his eyes over the retinue of five hundred men from the Libei Armored Cavalry. If they were really here to capture him, Zhou Gui couldn't stop them even if he tried. Xiao Chiye hadn't sent any letters after the start of the eighth month, so Shen Zechuan could only guess what they were doing here. Not particularly concerned, he reassured Zhou Gui. "Perhaps the heir consort is merely passing through. One can travel through Cizhou directly to Chazhou, and it's far more convenient to enter Qidong from that direction. There's no need for Your Excellency to worry. Libei is not our enemy."

As it turned out, this spontaneous remark from Shen Zechuan hit the nail on the head. Lu Yizhi was indeed heading south to go to Qidong.

Lu Pingyan had been implicated in Lu Guangbai's desertion, and the imperial court had ordered him taken into custody for questioning. Instead of complying, Qi Zhuyin had detained Yingxi, the military inspector eunuch assigned to the Bianjun Commandery, and demanded her own explanation

from the Ministry of War. She claimed Yingxi had repeatedly interfered in the affairs of Bianjun and questioned his involvement in the matter of the moldy provisions. In the interim, she'd brought Lu Pingyan into her own camp to look after him. Qi Zhuyin had sent a letter to Libei several months ago, asking Xiao Jiming to fetch Lu Pingyan away as soon as possible.

Lu Guangbai's desertion was a serious matter, and the ramifications hinged on whether or not he would throw in his lot with the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. The empire had had no news of the garrison troops of the Bianjun Commandery, but simply based on Lu Guangbai's act of striking out into the desert, it seemed possible that he was defecting to their enemy. The court ministers' request to put Lu Pingyan on trial was merely a means of holding him hostage in Qudu so they'd have the leverage to negotiate with Lu Guangbai in the future. But the missive relayed by the Ministry of War was, upon its arrival in Qidong, entirely ignored by Qi Zhuyin. At this juncture, the Embroidered Uniform Guard ought to have been deployed to carry out the arrest via an imperial edict.

Yet no such edict was issued.

When Zhongbo's troops had been routed six years ago, it was on the authority of an imperial edict that the Embroidered Uniform Guard, then led by Ji Lei, had detained Shen Zechuan for interrogation. This had required not only an arrest warrant, but also an official writ of arrest issued by the Ministry of Justice at the behest of the emperor, as well as the emperor's orders in ink. After Li Jianheng's death, the empress dowager had shouldered the Mandate of Heaven in his place. The court had proposed that the empress dowager and Grand Secretariat jointly issue the paperwork in place of the emperor's personally penned approval—but Qi Zhuyin had made it clear she would not accept this. She would acknowledge orders issued by the emperor and no other; until the Embroidered Uniform Guard came bearing an edict drafted by the emperor's own hand, she would never release Lu Pingyan.

Han Cheng, in personally leading Hua Xiangyi's honor guard, was also a messenger sent to negotiate with Qi Zhuyin. Though the empress dowager offered generous remuneration for Qidong's compliance, no agreement was reached. And as Qudu was now reliant on Qi Zhuyin's

troops, they didn’t dare force her hand. When Xiao Jiming had sent his people to inquire about the situation on the pretext of sending wedding gifts, Qi Zhuyin had sent an unequivocal verbal reply back with his messenger. Lu Yizhi’s trip was thus for the precise purpose of bringing Lu Pingyan back to Libei.

This detour to Cizhou was part of her secondary mission: Helping her father-in-law investigate what kind of person Shen Zechuan might be.

Naturally, Shen Zechuan couldn’t allow Lu Yizhi to spend the night at a relay station like any common traveler; he made a special point of tidying up a courtyard in the manor and invited Lu Yizhi to stay on Xiao Chiye’s behalf. Lu Yizhi noted that the upturned eaves of the manor were in Xiao Chiye’s preferred style, and that both the interior and exterior were organized and well maintained. She recalled the letter Xiao Chiye had sent before her departure, of which three pages were entirely given over to praising Shen Zechuan.

Lu Yizhi stepped down from the carriage, and Ding Tao joyfully scampered up to greet her. Delighted, Lu Yizhi pulled him along as she gave him a careful once-over. “Tao-zi, you’ve also grown a head taller. Why didn’t you come home with the second young master?”

“Master commanded me to stay put here at Gongzi’s side,” Ding Tao replied.

Lu Yizhi called for her maidservant to bring some candy for Ding Tao. She settled in a chair, clasped her hands together under her sleeves, and asked gently, “Does the second young master stay here often?”

Ding Tao hemmed and hawed, having been forewarned by Qiao Tianya of the tenor of this visit. But he didn’t dare lie to the heir consort.

“Back at home, you often came over to play and keep me company,” Lu Yizhi said, softening her voice further. “The grandson-heir always asks about his Tao-zi gege; he’s constantly wondering when you’ll come home and play with him.” She turned her face aside as she spoke, a little sad. “It has been six years since I saw our little Tao-zi; now he’s grown so distant from me.”

“No—not at all!” Ding Tao rushed to reply. “Your Ladyship always treats me well. I remember even before I left for Qudu, you told Jin-ge to look after me. I never forgot.”

Lu Yizhi looked back at him. “You’re young. As your elder brothers, it’s their responsibility to take care of you. When I heard how A-Ye was bullied in Qudu, I couldn’t eat; I was tossing and turning all night. There wasn’t a moment I didn’t worry.”

“Master wasn’t injured when he left Qudu,” Ding Tao responded immediately. “The Eight Great Battalions couldn’t catch up to us, and Han Jin, the one who chased us, is still locked up in jail here in Cizhou. Your Ladyship needn’t worry; Master is a very formidable man now.”

“If A-Ye is so impressive,” Lu Yizhi answered tragically, “why did your journey take so long?”

“Gongzi was injured,” Ding Tao explained. “When Han Cheng ambushed Master in the capital, Gongzi helped a lot. But that Han Cheng is abominable—he even used Gongzi’s teacher to threaten him. Gongzi couldn’t save his teacher, and after leaving Qudu, he fell terribly ill. None of the physicians along the way were any help, so we couldn’t travel too fast.”

Lu Yizhi didn’t know who Shen Zechuan’s teacher was, but this tale alarmed her. Her expression betrayed genuine concern as she asked, “What happened after? Has he recovered?”

Ding Tao was unsure how to explain. “He seems to have recovered, but Master and Grandpa Ji both say he hasn’t. When Gongzi was in Chazhou for business a few months ago, he fell sick again on the journey. Master flew into a rage when he came back.”

I knew it, she thought. It was as she’d expected: Xiao Chiye did come by often. “I’ve never seen A-Ye angry.”

“But Master was in a hurry that time; he only stayed a night before he had to leave.” Ding Tao thought for a moment before adding in a small voice, “He got in by climbing over the walls.”

Understanding dawned on Lu Yizhi. “Then, are you happy here? If you want to come back with me, I’ll bring you along.”

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Ding Tao hesitated. He did want to return to Libei, but he couldn't up and leave Cizhou. He'd made plans with Li Xiong to go fishing outside the city in winter, and had promised Ji Gang that he would learn a new set of boxing moves before the new year. Most importantly, Shen Zechuan never deducted anything from his allowance; he'd never even scolded him that time he'd kept the frogs in Shen Zechuan's courtyard.

Observing him, Lu Yizhi turned pensive. She patted Ding Tao on the head and didn't press him further. If Ding Tao was unsure, it meant Shen Zechuan treated him well. He must not be a difficult person to get along with; at the very least, he had exceptional patience with this half-grown youth.

Lu Yizhi considered all this in silence.

Here was a good-looking, domestic, patient, and loyal man who valued ties of duty and friendship. Not only could he keep his house in good order, he also had a promising political career. He could keep A-Ye in check, yet he wasn't overly domineering. His health was poor, likely an old ailment from his early years in Qudu. But despite the many setbacks he'd suffered in life, he remained warm and amiable.

What a wonderful child!

Lu Yizhi clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "Quick, prepare brush and ink! I'll write a letter back to the homeland overnight. Have my husband deliver it to His Lordship on the front lines once he's read it himself."

As a man not in Lu Yizhi's immediate family, it would be improper for Shen Zechuan to pay his respects directly. He set up a partition in the courtyard, dividing it into halves. With the advance notice he'd received that Lu Yizhi was passing through, the household had prepared a small feast to welcome their guest from afar, with Zhou Gui's wife pressed into service as feminine company during the meal.

Madam Zhou was an astute woman. She praised Shen Zechuan to the skies in her private conversations with Lu Yizhi, picking a few choice

incidents to recount. Lu Yizhi's initial impression of the Shen Clan had all been based on Shen Wei. It was Xiao Chiye who sent her a letter overnight to expound endlessly on Shen Zechuan's virtues. At the end, he'd subtly divulged that he'd taken a beating from his old man on the front lines and been demoted. He omitted the part where he'd nearly died in Tudalung Banner and merely revealed that he was injured, making Lu Yizhi's heart ache so much she couldn't bear to reproach him.

Lu Yizhi was only staying one night. The next morning, she would continue south to Chazhou. When the feast concluded, she summoned Shen Zechuan into the hall. The more she looked at him, the better-looking she found him to be, and the more satisfied she became. Recalling Xiao Chiye's mention of Shen Zechuan's past as well as the tale she'd heard from Ding Tao, her heart swelled with sympathy.

Shen Zechuan thought the way the heir consort was looking at him was similar to how one might look at a rabbit: She was as gentle as possible, as though even a slightly sterner expression might frighten him.

"Vice Commander Shen," Lu Yizhi said softly. "I was the one who imposed on you, yet you've gone to such trouble. I hope you'll accept this small token as a gesture of my gratitude."

Without waiting for a response, she gestured for her maidservant to present the gift. It was a box filled with brocade, nothing unusual or rare. Seeing it was not too valuable, Shen Zechuan accepted it after some polite civilities. Only when he took the box himself did he register its hefty weight.

When Shen Zechuan returned to the courtyard, he lifted the brocade out and found that beneath the fabric, gold and jade bracelets were nestled at the box's bottom, all intricately inlaid and exquisitely crafted.

Fei Sheng snuck a peek over his shoulder and marveled—wasn't this the kind of heirloom meant to be passed down to a daughter-in-law? Of course, he didn't dare voice such thoughts. He silently shifted his gaze away, leaving Shen Zechuan standing in puzzlement.

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Chapter 157:
Zhongxiong

WHEN LU YIZHI LEFT Cizhou the following day, Shen Zechuan sent Fei Sheng to accompany her entourage with the Embroidered Uniform Guard. His instructions were to escort her all the way into Qidong's territory. Outstanding official business from the day before had to be discussed, so everyone settled back into their customary seats in the study with the windows open.

"If I may, this is the new document for the vice commander's perusal." Zhou Gui placed the papers on the table. "We initially planned to keep a separate register of undocumented migrants and increase the severity of punishments, but during our discussion with Yuanzhuo this morning, he proposed we not govern them separately from registered citizens."

"Once you post the notice, the issue of household registration will resolve itself." Yao Wenyu coughed, then continued, "It won't do to segregate them at that point; it'll only create unhappiness among the newly registered commoners. Besides, how will the yamen differentiate between old and new citizens when they carry out their duties?"

After reading through, Shen Zechuan nodded his agreement. "If anyone tries to take advantage of the situation for their own gain, it'll be a disaster waiting to happen. Once this matter is settled, the only issue left for us to handle before the end of the year is the survey of fields. The current land records were all tabulated during the reign of Yongyi; they're long outdated."

"Cizhou has been reclaiming areas of wasteland around us for three years in a row," Zhou Gui explained. "The acreage of land has seen a significant increase. We should have re-surveyed last year, but we didn't have the manpower—and with Lei Changming bearing down on us, it was delayed until now." He made some quick calculations. "You're right. This task must be completed before the end of the year. If we attempt it once there's snow on the ground, errors are bound to arise."

Cizhou now had plenty of yamen runners and constables, but capable clerks were few and far between. Zhou Gui's advisors were mainly charged with deliberating official business and not responsible for the transcription of documents, let alone going out to survey the fields. The prefectural yamen was short-staffed, and so was Shen Zechuan.

"After newcomers register their households, screen them on the spot," Shen Zechuan declared. "As long as they're literate, note their name down for future use; it doesn't matter if they're Cizhou locals or transplants from Dancheng." At this point, he looked around at the advisors. "If anyone has a criminal history, we won't know unless they declare it, so we must be prudent during the vetting process. Some may also see this process as an opportunity; it's inevitable that there'll be a few who attempt to curry favor with those making the decisions. I trust you gentlemen are all men of integrity who can distinguish between the crafty and the virtuous, and do the right thing."

Seeing as he'd laid it out so plainly, no one missed his point. The advisors who'd been settled, smoking their pipes, now rose from their seats. A few looked embarrassed, no longer daring to treat this lightly.

These advisors were all Zhou Gui's honored guests, with the freedom to enter and exit the manor as they pleased. Most were referred to as *Mister*, with their daily needs provided for by Zhou Gui. There were only two ways they could earn some spare cash. The first was by providing literary services or selling calligraphy and ink paintings; the second was by attending banquets hosted by the local gentry and elders, whereupon they would receive monetary rewards for the honor of their presence. Now that migrants were flooding into Cizhou, these advisors had been put in charge of household registration and screening potential clerks; no doubt some of these migrants would be thinking of sneaking them bribes in hopes of preferential treatment.

Gao Zhongxiong was one of many unlucky people caught in this mess.

The scholar's path had been a tumultuous one. He'd left his home in Yuzhou to enter the Imperial College, where he'd bragged that he and Qi Huilian hailed from the same hometown. As he had a bit of talent and

learning, he had become a leading figure among the students in Qudu and had even written essays in an attempt to challenge Yao Wenyu. Last year, when Xi Hongxuan had goaded the students of the Imperial College to protest over the matter of Shen Zechuan's release from the Temple of Guilt, Gao Zhongxiong had been the one kneeling at the very front, loudly condemning Pan Rugui and Ji Lei as traitors to the nation. Afterward, he'd been taken into the Imperial Prison, his future as a scholar destroyed. In a fit of anger, he'd joined Han Jin's camp as his advisor—it was his suggestion that had sent Han Jin straight into the Imperial Army's jaws. Han Jin had ended up captured and imprisoned in Cizhou, where he remained to this day, waiting for rescue.

Fearing Han Cheng would blame him for his brother's fate, Gao Zhongxiong didn't dare return to Qudu. Instead, he sought a favor from his maternal uncle in Dancheng and stayed as Pan Yi's advisor. At first, Pan Yi had planned to entrust him with heavy responsibilities—but many of the strategies Gao Zhongxiong put forth were impractical ideas that only sounded good on paper. Pan Yi gradually gave him the cold shoulder. Bullied and humiliated by the servants of the Pan manor, Gao Zhongxiong could do nothing but return to his uncle's house. But when it rained, it poured: His uncle fell to his death one night after drinking. As Gao Zhongxiong was a scholar whose arms were too weak for manual labor, his aunt disdained him for being useless and sought an excuse to send him back to Yuzhou.

Gao Zhongxiong was too ashamed to return home to face his family and friends. He considered selling calligraphy and paintings to rent a few acres of modest farmland, where he would make like the sages of old and lead a simple, virtuous life far from the struggles of wealth and power. But to his great dismay, after saving enough money to rent the field, he only worked the land a handful of times before it was occupied by a local despot from the Fei Clan. Gao Zhongxiong marched to the yamen to lodge a complaint, but that very same night, he was cornered in an alley and beaten to a pulp. Even his house was robbed. Gao Zhongxiong was again driven out into the streets without a penny to his name. He finally wanted to return to Yuzhou but had no coin for passage. Left with no choice, he fled

Dancheng with the other migrants and came to Cizhou, hoping to try his luck.

"Old Man Xu." Gao Zhongxiong stood nervously outside the door of the prefectural yamen. When he saw the man emerging, he quickly called out, "Any news?"

He'd been a distinguished figure back in Qudu, yet now he had to humble himself when speaking to others. He wanted to ingratiate himself, but his pride kept him from going too far. So he simply stood rooted to the spot, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

The yamen runner, surnamed Xu, brandished his broad wooden staff and shooed Gao Zhongxiong off to the side. Only when they were out of sight of the door did he hiss at Gao Zhongxiong, "What are you doing here?"

Gao Zhongxiong was so humiliated at this admonishment that, for a moment, he couldn't lift his head. Gripping his sleeves, he forced a smile and finally managed to look up. "I passed by the wine shop earlier and brought some over for you to quench your thirst. Here, sir, have some." He presented the wine gourd with both hands, continuing only when he saw the other man's expression had softened slightly. "I've been in Cizhou a few days. About the matter I spoke of last time—"

"The matter you spoke of?" Runner Xu drank the wine, wiped his mouth, and flatly lied: "What matter is that?"

"The matter of getting a job in the yamen." Gao Zhongxiong didn't raise his hand to wipe the man's spittle off his cheek. "Please do me a favor and pass a message on to the advisors. Just say I was formerly a student in Qudu who has received critique from the Chief Surveillance Bureau's Cen —"

"Oh, *that*. That can be easily arranged." Runner Xu moved in closer. "Bring me three taels of silver, and I'll buy a few packs of tobacco for the gentlemen. After that, you'll get in for sure!"

Gao Zhongxiong was taken aback, his expression a mixture of hope and sorrow. "But I've already given it all to you. I have no more money."

The old man's expression instantly turned cold. "How can you do anything without money? Do you think the advisors are suckers? They can recognize gold and silver as well as anyone! If I hadn't taken pity on you and helped you out, what could you do with this piddly amount of silver? Hmm? It's far from enough!"

Gao Zhongxiong grasped the man's arm. "I've already given you seven taels of silver. You must have some news!"

"You want to bribe your way in, but you can't bear to part with your money." Runner Xu threw the wine gourd back at Gao Zhongxiong and stretched his neck out to spit on him, his words contemptuous. "You'd have to loosen that money belt just to piss or shit around here!"

This wily old yamen runner had swindled Gao Zhongxiong of all his money. After hanging around with the other migrants all day, the scholar was as filthy as any beggar. As he stared at Runner Xu's wrinkly old mug, he again recalled the humiliation he'd suffered in Dancheng. Unable to contain himself, he charged toward the man and slapped him. "If you're not going to help me, give me back my money!"

Runner Xu never imagined Gao Zhongxiong would have the nerve to strike him. He jabbed a finger at Gao Zhongxiong's nose. "You! A dirty cheapskate like you dares to hit me?!"

He swung his staff at Gao Zhongxiong's waist, kicked him to the ground, and struck him viciously. Gao Zhongxiong was a scholar, not a fighter, and had been starving for days. He felt a stab of intense pain; the staff must've cracked his ribs. Rolling on the ground, he covered his head as he attempted to dodge the blows, crying so hard he could scarcely breathe. Even so, he continued to shout, "Have you no conscience? You cheated me of my very last coins! Have you no conscience?!"

They'd begun to draw the eyes of passersby. Runner Xu didn't dare make too big a scene, lest his colleagues in the yamen come to investigate. He tossed his staff aside and straddled Gao Zhongxiong on the ground, then gripped his jaw and shoved his handkerchief into his mouth to gag him. Gao Zhongxiong howled as he struggled, so the old man slapped him until

Gao Zhongxiong's ears were ringing and his vision blurred. Blood seeped from the corners of his mouth.

"I'm on official business here!" Runner Xu called to the growing crowd. "This son of a bitch is a thief from Dancheng. I already caught him once—to think he has the balls to come and seek revenge!"

A groan escaped Gao Zhongxiong as Runner Xu grasped his collar and dragged him into the yamen compound. His cheek scraped the ground, bloodied by the rough gravel. He reached his hand out toward the spectators in a silent plea for help.

Runner Xu kicked Gao Zhongxiong a few more times in the ribs and stomach for good measure. Most yamen runners were adept at detaining people for questioning—teaching a frail scholar like Gao Zhongxiong a lesson was child's play. If he brought Gao Zhongxiong in and kept him gagged while he processed him with a thievery charge, he could throw him in jail. All he had to do then was to drop a word to a jailer he was on good terms with, and Gao Zhongxiong would get what he had coming. Whether or not he survived past the eighth month would all depend on Runner Xu's mood.

As Gao Zhongxiong was being dragged across the dirt, Zhou Gui was returning with Shen Zechuan from the fields outside the city. The carriage had been obstructed on one of the city roads—yet another instance of the migrants causing trouble, Zhou Gui presumed.

Shen Zechuan didn't say a word. It was Zhou Gui who hastily stepped off his own carriage, lifting the hem of his robe as he pushed through the crowd. "What's all this? Who's kicking up such a fuss outside the yamen?"

"Your Excellency," Runner Xu replied. "I've caught a thief! He not only refuses to submit, he even struck me!"

Anxious and weary from the disorder in the city these past few days, Zhou Gui scowled. "Be that as it may, this is no way to handle it. What are you doing beating people in the streets? It's disgraceful!" He glanced down at Gao Zhongxiong, intending to educate him next on the morals of a good citizen. But he remembered they were still in the way of Shen Zechuan's

carriage, which oughtn't be delayed. "Hurry then, bring him in. See that he gets a proper trial once he's cleaned up."

Upon hearing this, Gao Zhongxiong thrashed with all his might, attempting to spit out the handkerchief in his mouth.

Within the carriage, Yao Wenyu was discussing the clerk interviews they'd conducted over the past few days with Shen Zechuan. The carriage showed no signs of moving anytime soon. Qiao Tianya stepped over and lifted a corner of the curtain to report. "Master, they're still arguing. Let's take a detour."

Shen Zechuan pushed the curtain higher with his fan. "What's the matter?"

"They're saying it's a thief—the yamen runner arrested him on the street." Qiao Tianya ducked his head and shuffled out of the way so Shen Zechuan could see. "I didn't spot any calluses on his hands; he seems to be a scholar."

Yao Wenyu, who rarely enjoyed noisy places these days, followed their gazes. The street was swarming with people; he could see nothing at all.

"Let's go around." Shen Zechuan let the curtain fall. "Head straight back to the Zhou manor. There are still people waiting in the study. We should discuss the matter of the trade market before nightfall."

Qiao Tianya ordered the carriage driver to turn around. As the wheels began to spin, they heard a heartbreaking wail: "You people are trying to kill me! You're killing me! What kind of yamen is this?! Merciful heavens, must you reduce Gao Zhongxiong to such desperate straits?!"

Yao Wenyu lifted the curtain again and said to Qiao Tianya, "Go stop him. That's Gao Zhongxiong, someone who'd received critique on his essays from Cen Yu himself." He looked toward Shen Zechuan. "He's the one who led three thousand students from the Imperial College to denounce Pan Rugui that rainy night. Vice Commander, this is someone we can use!"

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Chapter 158:
Broken Jade

CLERKS WERE NOT to be confused with government officials. They were at the bottom of the hierarchy, with no rank—but they could write and count, and were often more proficient in their knowledge of local law than the esteemed officials who sat high in their seats. As a result, too many clerks were adept at disposing of the evidence of their own fraud, oppression, and extortion of the commoners. Nor was it unusual, in places far away from the watchful eyes of the central administration, for those in such positions to cover for one another.

When Luo Mu had first arrived in Chazhou hoping to clean house, there had been plenty of things he didn't manage to tackle, in part thanks to the impediment of the local clerks. The management of his subordinates in the local administration didn't merely affect the head official's political record; sometimes, these same people could also become obstacles to the implementation of his policies.

The imperial court had assigned a Provincial Surveillance Commissioner to Zhongbo shortly after its fall, but by then, Dunzhou could no longer hold the other five prefectures in check. In recent years, the local administrators within the six prefectures, including the clerks, had become increasingly corrupt.

Gao Zhongxiong was taken to a physician while Zhou Gui paced in the study. The advisors sat silent in the partitioned area, waiting for Shen Zechuan to speak. This incident affected not only the screening of clerks but whether the prefectural yamen would be replacing its current staff.

When Zhou Gui spoke, his tone was grave. "We were just discussing this yesterday, and already things have gone awry. Old Man Xu alone has accepted bribes of over a dozen silver taels. There are so many men in the yamen—if others are taking similar bribes, how many of the clerks we employ as a result of this screening will be genuinely useful?"

Yao Wenyu took a sip of tea, put the lid back on his cup, and said nothing.

Anyone with the most basic powers of discernment could see this case implicated Zhou Gui's advisors. Old Man Xu was merely a member of the yamen staff, yet he dared use the screenings as an opportunity for brazen bribe-taking. Without a contact behind the scenes, his scheme would have been impossible.

Yao Wenyu was Shen Zechuan's advisor. If he spoke up and asked that the offenders be dealt with severely, he would be suspected of trying to supplant Zhou Gui's people. In all recent discussions, he had been seated securely by Shen Zechuan's side as his counselor, but he was a newcomer, and could not compare to the others in seniority. The reputation of Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo was known far and wide. Others had treated him as an immortal when he was beyond their reach, but now that he had fallen, he was a live target. Some jockeying among peers was to be expected, but if this led to friction between Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui, it would be to the detriment of all Cizhou.

"Every injustice has its perpetrator, and every debt its debtor." Shen Zechuan tossed his fan in his hand, his expression unreadable. "Deal with the offender according to standard procedures. The screening process is a significant undertaking; there is plenty at stake. We cannot risk harming any of the diligent and hardworking gentlemen here out of paranoia."

The advisors on the other side of the partition made not a sound, although a few inwardly sighed in relief. As long as Shen Zechuan lived in Cizhou, he relied on Zhou Gui's power and influence. Of course he would handle this matter with a soft touch. Corruption within the prefectural administration could and should be rooted out, but now was not a good time. If they cracked down and followed the trail of evidence, they might conceivably implicate over half the staff in Cizhou's prefectural yamen. How would they get any work done if the office was empty?

But now Zhou Gui was the reluctant one. "Vice Commander, it is precisely because it's significant that it must be investigated! We can't let these people destroy the ethos of the prefectural yamen. If more people

imitate this behavior in the future, the commoners will be the ones to suffer.”

“Naturally it must be investigated. What I meant was that we should proceed by the book.” Shen Zechuan called for more tea, then continued, “Old Man Xu has been taken into custody. If Your Excellency has misgivings, then by all means, send someone you trust to sit in and transcribe his interrogation. With the Embroidered Uniform Guard conducting the trial, we will have results by tonight. Baseless accusations cannot be trusted, but conclusive evidence cannot be disregarded. Whosoever violated the regulations of the yamen will have to bear the consequences of their actions. The newly transcribed penal laws were just posted. This incident has come at the perfect time: Your Excellency can hold the trial before the citizens of Cizhou. The more muddied the waters, the more important it is to sift until they’re clear. But once the case concludes, we must not take rumors for truth and jump to conclusions; the yamen must not implicate the innocent.”

“This trial must be undertaken as a warning,” Zhou Gui said.

“Just so,” Shen Zechuan concurred. “Minor offenders shall be dismissed from their position, and serious offenders shall be exiled to barren lands. If public sentiment runs high against the guilty parties, an on-the-spot execution can also deliver immense satisfaction.”

A crash rang out from the other side of the partition, and the stunned gasps of the advisors filled the air.

“What happened?” Zhou Gui cried.

“Your Excellency, someone fainted!” several voices replied at once.

These advisors had assumed Shen Zechuan meant to punish only Old Man Xu and show mercy to the rest of them; they hadn’t expected he wanted to make a public example of them. How could an old lout from the countryside like Old Man Xu withstand the interrogation of the Embroidered Uniform Guard? When Shen Zechuan had said they mustn’t implicate the innocent, he meant not pursuing the matter further than this—but not a single person involved in Old Man Xu’s bribery racket was going to get away with it. As they sat and listened, their horror grew; when Shen

Zechuan uttered the words *on-the-spot execution*, one of them passed out cold. It was briefly pandemonium in the study.

Elsewhere, Gao Zhongxiong was grimacing in pain under the hands of the physician. After his wounds were tended and his meal was ready, he changed into a clean set of clothes with the help of the maidservants. He had always been one to place great value on health and wellness back in Qudu; although he was starving, he didn't gobble down his meal.

When he finished eating, the maidservants led Gao Zhongxiong to the courtyard. He didn't dare look around on the way. He knew Shen Zechuan was currently residing in Cizhou, and was thus deeply apprehensive. As a man who had given Han Jin counsel on the pursuit and capture of Xiao Chiye, coming to Cizhou at all had been a risky move.

Gao Zhongxiong stepped into the courtyard and saw that the orange jasmine beyond the wooden railing of the veranda had all withered. No one had swept away the blanket of white petals, presumably at the instructions of the master of the house, that its natural fragrance might linger in the air. The soft green moss and fine gravel along the edge of the pond bridge resembled a plush new mattress.

The sight distracted him as he ascended the steps, and in his moment of inattention, he nearly slipped. He awkwardly recovered and, sweating profusely, bowed to the maidservants snickering behind their hands.

Wind chimes dangled beneath the eaves. Ding Tao waited for Gao Zhongxiong to approach before he lifted the curtains and led him inside. Not knowing Ding Tao's identity, Gao Zhongxiong didn't dare offend him. He lifted the hem of his own robe, intending to stride in, only to realize there was no elevated threshold at the door of this room.

The interior of the hall was bright and spacious, bare of any valuable ornaments. Back in Qudu, Gao Zhongxiong had often heard that Shen Zechuan kept company with the likes of Xi Hongxuan; he was said to be fond of extravagance, carrying a small ivory fan at all times. Gao Zhongxiong guessed that perhaps the owner of this manor was Zhou Gui.

He took his seat, sitting upright and very still, his buttocks barely touching the edge of the chair as he watched for signs of movement in the

courtyard. A short moment later, he heard the sound of wheels outside. Ding Tao, who had been under the eaves, stepped out to greet someone: “Young Master.”

The curtain lifted, and Gao Zhongxiong rose to his feet. Yet the first one to enter was neither Shen Zechuan nor Zhou Gui, but a tall and wild-looking bodyguard. The guard didn’t look at Gao Zhongxiong. Instead, he leaned over to take hold of a wheelchair and pushed in a green-robed young man with an overcoat draped over his shoulders.

Gao Zhongxiong had already bent his knees to kneel, but when he got a clear look at the wheelchair’s occupant, he couldn’t help but gape. He took a step back, eyes wide. “Yao…Yuanzhuo!”

The exclamation put a frown on Shen Zechuan’s face. He entered a step behind the wheelchair and removed his overcoat, heading straight for the seat of honor.

Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu to the front, and the maidservants came forward to serve tea. Yao Wenyu balanced the cup in his hands and said with his usual mild expression, “It’s been a long time. I didn’t expect Shenwei to have come to Cizhou too.”

Inexplicably, Gao Zhongxiong broke out in a cold sweat. He dabbed at his brow and hummed an acknowledgment. No longer daring to meet Yao Wenyu’s eyes, he hastily paid his respects to Shen Zechuan. “Y-Your Excellency.”

Shen Zechuan found this man’s expression peculiar. After settling himself, he said, “There’s no need to be so formal. Take a seat.”

But how would Gao Zhongxiong possibly dare?

“Since Shenwei knows the vice commander, there’s no need for me to waste time on introductions.” Upon seeing Gao Zhongxiong’s pallor, Yao Wenyu paused for a moment, then softened his tone. “Shenwei, don’t be afraid. I’m very much still alive.”

Gao Zhongxiong absently repeated, “Yes.”

“Yuanzhuo, what makes you say that?” Shen Zechuan asked.

“I had a chance encounter with Shenwei in Dancheng,” Yao Wenyu explained succinctly. “The poison and my injuries acted up simultaneously then and gave him quite a scare.”

But if the nervousness with which Gao Zhongxiong fidgeted was any indication, it had been more than a chance encounter. After Yao Wenyu’s legs were broken and he left the capital, he’d traveled to Dancheng, where he remained under the care of Pan Yi and Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. He must have encountered the poison that had so destroyed his health in Dancheng, but until now, he had never told anyone the story.

Gao Zhongxiong, however, knew all about it.

“I left Dancheng in a hurry. Are the commandant and the commandery princess well?” Yao Wenyu asked.

At Yao Wenyu’s gentle tone, Gao Zhongxiong gradually relaxed enough to answer smoothly, though he kept his head turned, too afraid to look at Yao Wenyu. “Yes, they’re both fine.”

Shen Zechuan sensed a strange undercurrent beneath this exchange.

The maidservants had retreated. Ding Tao was idly striking the wind chimes under the eaves; they clinked noisily, as if buffeted by a gale. Qiao Tianya stuck his head out to chase Ding Tao off, and only then did it finally fall quiet on the other side of the bamboo blinds.

There was no perceptible shift in Yao Wenyu’s mood after hearing this news. He set aside his teacup and broke the silence. “When I arrived in Dancheng, the commandery princess looked after me for a time. But she is, after all, a married woman. It would be improper for her to become too involved. The commandant thus sought out his younger brother of common birth, Pan Yuan, who was still living at home.”

Pan Yuan was an idler who spent his days loafing around. Though he was fond of gambling, he was not a son of lawful birth and had only a small allowance; he relied on Pan Yi and his wife to repay the enormous debt he owed. Pan Yi placed Yao Wenyu in Pan Yuan’s care, hoping his younger brother might be inspired to emulate the virtuous Yuanzhuo and thus better himself. He remembered Pan Yuan had been quite dedicated to taking care of their elderly father in the past, and could be considered a filial son.

And indeed, Pan Yuan was attentive enough, at first. Thanks to Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's exhortations, he didn't dare be negligent in his care of Yao Wenyu. And he didn't have to do anything personally. His only job was to watch the physicians and attendants to ensure they were timely with the meals and medicine and not loafing on the job. But over time, Pan Yuan grew bored and impatient, and started to find excuses to venture out to gamble.

"Pan Lin used a prisoner's body as a decoy, but this didn't dispel Xue Xiuzhuo's suspicions," Yao Wenyu explained. "The commandery princess left in such a hurry, and it was inevitable that there were spies in her entourage. Later, the gambling den came hounding Pan Yuan for payment, and Pan Yuan went into hiding. He was too afraid to tell his family, so he often poured his woes out to me. Penniless as I am, however, I was in no position to help even if I wanted to."

Gao Zhongxiong nodded. "Pan Yuan sought me out as well around that time to borrow money. He said he'd been backed into a corner. He'd sold off the fields belonging to his branch of the family, but he still couldn't pay down his debt. I advised him to tell the commandant as soon as possible before more trouble came of it, but he refused."

Yao Wenyu listened in silence.

"Not half a month later," Gao Zhongxiong continued, "Pan Yuan suddenly came to me for a drink. He said his gambling debts had been fully paid—he'd met a generous benefactor who had extended a helping hand. Of course I worried he'd been deceived by the gambling den, so I sounded him out about this benefactor. But he only said the man was a Longyou merchant from Qudu who'd asked him to run a small errand."

Another half a month passed, yet Yao Wenyu's injuries did not heal—instead, his health had deteriorated further. Commandery Princess Zhaoyue questioned all the physicians, but Yao Wenyu's condition showed no improvement. At the same time, Pan Lin met with censure in Qudu, and Pan Yi was impeached along with him. The issue turned out to be the Pan Clan's fields in Dancheng. Pan Xiangjie didn't dare speak up for his sons, terrified of drawing more ire down on the family. But even the Pan Clan's repeated

concessions didn’t stop the storm from blowing their way; the imperial censors got so heated they demanded Pan Lin be suspended pending trial.

The Pan Clan was by no means innocent, but those were debts born of Pan Xiangjie’s greed; it was obvious to Pan Lin that he was bearing the brunt of it because he was harboring Yao Wenyu. Pan Lin was incensed at the injustice, and adamant on fighting Xue Xiuzhuo to the bitter end.

It didn’t take long for Pan Xiangjie to learn the inside story. Fearing the entire clan would be implicated, he sent a letter to Pan Yi in Dancheng overnight. In it, he demanded that Pan Yi send Yao Wenyu back to Qudu as soon as possible. Pan Yi refused. His defiance sent Pan Xiangjie into such a rage that he became bedridden from illness.

While Pan Yi was caught in this dilemma, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue grew increasingly suspicious about Yao Wenyu’s worsening condition. She bypassed the front hall and instructed her personal maid to call a physician from outside the manor to take a look.

Yao Wenyu had no wish to get into the details. After a moment of silence, he simply said, “The commandery princess was worried Qudu would use the pretext of inspecting the fields to come and capture me. She had initially wanted to send me to convalesce at a country manor that came as part of her dowry, but her suspicions with regard to the medicine meant she could no longer trust the servants of the Pan manor. She prepared travel expenses and entrusted someone with the task of smuggling me to Jincheng, where my late teacher’s old friends still reside.”

But misfortune never came singly. His entourage saw that Yao Wenyu was not only seriously ill but lacked the use of both legs. Almost as soon as they left the city, they forgot every word of the commandery princess’s instructions and ran away with both the travel expenses and carriage under cover of night.

Yao Wenyu had been abandoned in the dark. All that remained, other than the donkey, was the kitten in his sleeve. He was used to sleeping in the wilderness with the earth as his pillow when he wandered the mountains and plains, but his experience now was poles apart. For the first time in his twenty-four years of life, he confronted his own uselessness. Stripped of his

reputation, he was nobody. *Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo*—at that moment, Yao Wenyu loathed that name to the core. It was a humiliation carved deep into his bones.

Lying in the wilderness, Yao Wenyu broke down and cried inconsolably.

For his teacher, and for himself.

He had refused to see anyone when he was in Dancheng, merely lying on that bed, shrouded in dimness from dawn till dusk. The pain was in his legs, but his self-worth was the thing that had shattered. He was forced to acknowledge that he could no longer take care of himself. His carefree spirit had turned to smoke and ash, scattered in the wind. This realization haunted his dreams each night he slept, and dogged his days each morning he woke.

He was broken through and through.

Yet he still wanted to live.

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Chapter 159:
Nameless

SOMETHING HAD GONE awry with Yao Wenyu's medicine. Though the physicians from the Pan manor couldn't figure out what was wrong, whatever it was could no doubt be laid at the feet of Pan Yuan. After all, he had been the one tasked with looking after Yao Wenyu. The commandery princess attempted to track down the Longyou merchant who had paid off Pan Yuan's debts, but the man had disappeared without a trace. And not long after Yao Wenyu left, Pan Yuan fell off his horse and died. With this, the trail leading to whomever had instigated him to poison Yao Wenyu went cold. Still, Pan Lin was certain Xue Xiuzhuo was behind it; their relationship in Qudu continued to deteriorate.

Gao Zhongxiong sensed the creeping tension in the room. He too had been on friendly terms with Pan Yuan, and he felt as though he was sitting on pins and needles, waiting for Yao Wenyu to blame him by association. When the silence became too much for him to bear, he blurted, "I was acquainted with Pan Yuan, but we don't share the same ideals. Any conversation we had over wine was merely a polite formality." He was unskilled at flattery and stumbled over his words. "On the contrary, I—I greatly admire Yuanzhuo's talent. Perhaps you remember that gathering in Chaodong Tavern during the reign of Xiande. Yuanzhuo's talent and bearing were dazzling then, truly a sight to behold…"

Yao Wenyu waited for Gao Zhongxiong to trail off before calmly replying, "The past is but a dream; we needn't mention it here. It's fate that I've encountered you again in Cizhou. I've found a good master here, but may I ask what plans you have for the future?"

Gao Zhongxiong stole a glance at Shen Zechuan. "What plans *could* I have? Look at me." His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "I've been reduced to a laughingstock. I persevered in my studies for so many years, but in the end, it's all come to nothing."

Beneath his sleeves, Shen Zechuan's fingers tightened around his folding fan. The room felt chilly; it was time to get someone to prepare a hand warmer. He pulled his wandering mind back to the present, his jade earring swaying slightly as he spoke politely to Gao Zhongxiong. "The political climate is unstable, and great men across the land are stepping out from the crowd to make a name for themselves. Since Mister Shenwei has come so far to Cizhou, why not reside in my manor for now and take your time to decide?"

Gao Zhongxiong couldn't help but feel greatly touched to hear Shen Zechuan address him as *Mister Shenwei*. He'd been through untold hardship on his journey, and the masters he had encountered and served had not been good ones. He stood and bowed deeply to Shen Zechuan, his expressions of thanks even more awkward and inarticulate than his praise of Yao Wenyu had been. Shen Zechuan spoke a few more comforting words, and Gao Zhongxiong finally withdrew almost an hour later.

Yao Wenyu watched the bamboo blinds falling back into place. He waited until Gao Zhongxiong was out of earshot before asking, "Can the vice commander see no use for this man?"

Even if Shen Zechuan truly thought so, he couldn't say it outright. "For you to have given him such a strong recommendation, there must be something extraordinary about him."

"I think so," Yao Wenyu said. "Gao Zhongxiong's courtesy name is Shenwei, *divinely powerful*. In the Imperial College he was known as the 'Sharpened Pen.' Back then, when Xi Hongxuan was stirring up unrest in Qudu by inciting the Imperial College, he chose Gao Zhongxiong precisely because of his eloquence. Gao Zhongxiong entered the capital as a student in the fourth year of Xiande. It was just after the fall of Zhongbo, when the six prefectures had become a scene of devastation. The 'Lamentation of Chashi' he wrote under the influence of wine sent the students falling over themselves to transcribe private copies for distribution. When the essay made its way into Cen Yu's hands, he was so moved he shed tears by candlelight."

Shen Zechuan sipped his tea. "I see."

The students' demonstration back then, facilitated by Xi Hongxuan, had in fact been instigated by Shen Zechuan himself. When Gao Zhongxiong had led the Imperial College in demanding answers for Shen Zechuan's release from the Temple of Guilt, it had been Pan Rugui and Ji Lei who arrived to quell the disturbance. The students had redirected their anger at these two, turning the entire farce into a dispute between the Imperial College and Pan Rugui's faction. Ji Lei and the rest had been caught off-guard and subsequently lost the opportunity to land a decisive blow on Shen Zechuan as he entered the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

No one knew better than Shen Zechuan how that fiasco had begun. It was the same for the Imperial College riots Xue Xiuzhuo had later instigated. Both he and Shen Zechuan had deliberately manipulated public sentiment before herding the students in a desired direction. To accomplish such a feat, compelling rhetoric—words that had the power to move men—was indispensable. Yao Wenyu's meaning was clear: Gao Zhongxiong possessed such a power. His writing could sway hearts and minds, and a talent like this was exactly what Shen Zechuan now needed.

"Your trip to Chazhou made the vice commander a household name in Zhongbo, but as long as you bear the stain of Shen Wei's name, you will be unable to lead the people openly or convince others to follow you." Yao Wenyu paused. "Even if the full story of what happened in Zhongbo is made public, Shen Wei will likely never be absolved of blame." A tarnished reputation stole weight from one's words. This was a problem Shen Zechuan could not circumvent.

When the self-crowned King Yi of Fanzhou was drafting up letters and pamphlets to vilify Cizhou, he had made reference to Zhongbo's fall numerous times. Shen Wei's cowardice was a fact; there was no way to refute it even if Zhou Gui wanted to. Shen Zechuan was Shen Wei's eighth son of common birth. They were related by blood, and whether or not he had been an unfavored child did nothing to diminish public anger. Unlike Fei Sheng, who had merely a distant, common-birth connection to the Fei Clan, Shen Zechuan's ties to the Shen Clan were undeniable, and a glib tongue wouldn't convince anyone otherwise.

Moreover, although they now knew that the true cause of the tragedy in Zhongbo had been Hua Siqian and his faction's attempts to fill the void in the state treasury, all the evidence had been destroyed. Shen Wei had self-immolated, Hua Siqian had died in prison, and Wei Huaigu had swallowed poison, taking their secrets with them. There was not a single trace left to find of their collusion with the Biansha Horsemen to sell Great Zhou's defensive maps.

This was the dark cloud looming over Shen Zechuan's head. It was also his greatest stumbling block. How was it that he had risen so swiftly to power in Cizhou yet faced such a scarcity of capable subordinates? The talents of the land refused to approach him. They'd rather follow heroes like King Yi who had risen in rebellion from among the common folk than throw in their lot with a traitor's son.

"The vice commander executed one of Cizhou's advisors today; only by holding the trial publicly did you prevent your name from falling further into infamy. You've overseen the rise of Cizhou and the alliance with Chazhou, but if the vice commander wishes to advance a step further, you must drop the title of 'Vice Commander'." Noting that Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged as he toyed with his folding fan, Yao Wenyu knew he had already considered this. He continued, "Cizhou has long freed itself from Qudu's control. Using your old title makes it too easy to mistake who is the master and who the subordinates. Maintaining the address is no longer apt."

By this point, the two had reached a tacit understanding.

Shen Zechuan could be addressed as *Vice Commander* or even *Judge*—those were his titles in the Embroidered Uniform Guard—but both had been rendered void the instant he left Qudu. He was now in Cizhou, and the prefect of Cizhou was Zhou Gui. Without a new title of his own, he would always be the guest, and Zhou Gui the host and master. The offending advisors could remain securely in place on the other side of the partition, despite what had happened at the prefectural yamen, because they still treated Zhou Gui as the administrator of Cizhou. They didn't see themselves as subordinate to Shen Zechuan. There was still a line marking him an outsider.

Only Kong Ling had recognized the problem long ago. He had brought this very thing to Zhou Gui's attention before he set off for Chazhou, and had reminded Zhou Gui again before he left for Huaizhou. But Zhou Gui truly wasn't well-acquainted with this kind of political maneuvering, and thus had been slow to react.

Shen Zechuan couldn't proclaim himself king—at least, not yet. King Yi of Fanzhou had helpfully established himself first; now, he became the prey standing right under Qidong's nose. Qi Zhuyin had had enough time to catch her breath and return to the board. Once she dealt with the Bianjun Commandery, she would at last have the wherewithal to deploy troops to Zhongbo—and the first adversary she would confront would be these self-proclaimed commoner kings.

"There are benefits to being nameless nobodies." Shen Zechuan leaned back slightly. "At least Qi Zhuyin has no justifiable reason to skirt the other five prefectures and come after Cizhou."

Cizhou had no bandits or self-styled kings. The Eight Great Battalions were pursuing Xiao Chiye, who commanded the Imperial Army. At most, Shen Zechuan was a fugitive, and Cizhou could be accused of harboring him. Zhou Gui hadn't openly run up the rebel flag; he was still technically the prefect in this territory. If he turned a deaf ear to Qudu's orders, it could be explained away by the vast distance between Cizhou and the capital.

On these grounds alone, Qi Zhuyin could not directly attack Cizhou. Conceivably, she could route her troops to the western side of Cizhou and claim she was suppressing bandits, then enter with the excuse of passing through to the other prefectures. But deploying her troops this way would be expensive, and it was unlikely Qudu could spare the money. The best option had always been for the Eight Great Battalions to deploy their own troops. They were garrisoned closer to Cizhou, and could be supplied by Dancheng. If they used the excuse of tracking down the fugitive Shen Zechuan, they could easily instigate a war with Cizhou. But Han Jin had been too impatient. Xiao Chiye had routed his troops and beaten Han Jin silly. The Eight Great Battalions had cowered back.

But such a delicate balance couldn't be maintained for long.

The Eight Great Battalions were bound to rally for another attempt. Once the three factions in Qudu stabilized under a new emperor, the Ministry of War would appoint a new chief commander. Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had accepted the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds from Zhou Gui in order to guard against this very situation. Once they took up residence, the Imperial Army with its twenty thousand men would become a shield defending the western edge of Cizhou, purposely positioned to resist the Eight Great Battalions. Yet at the same time, the moment the Imperial Army reentered Cizhou's territory, Qi Zhuyin could justifiably march north and attack Cizhou to eliminate the rebel forces.

Thus Shen Zechuan was in no hurry to get rid of King Yi of Fanzhou. He was happy to let this man be the mountain between him and Qidong. Yet he couldn't allow King Yi to expand his territory unchecked either.

"Before, I advised the vice commander to take Fanzhou down swiftly, but the timing is no longer right." The tea in Yao Wenyu's cup had cooled. "If the vice commander wants to keep King Yi in play, you must hack off the hand he is extending north."

"A few months ago," Shen Zechuan said, his eyes sharp, "Ce'an sent Lei Jingzhe back to Mount Luo with his reputation in tatters. Ever since he lost control of the bandits, it's been chaos on Mount Luo as the various factions turn against one another. If King Yi wishes to form an alliance with Mount Luo, Lei Jingzhe, who badly wants to return to power, certainly won't miss the opportunity."

Something stirred in Yao Wenyu's eyes. "The vice commander means to—"

Shen Zechuan snapped open his folding fan and partially covered his face. With a smile in his eyes, he said, "I'd like to lend him a helping hand."

The wind had picked up outside the window. It seemed it was about to rain again.

Han Jin had gouged at the walls until his fingers were scraped bloody. He had been in the Cizhou prison close to three months, so emaciated he was barely recognizable. Even worse, he endured a constant

stream of verbal abuse and insults from guards and fellow prisoners. At first he couldn't take it and wept day in and day out, but as time passed, he gradually grew numb.

"Mealtime." Bucket in hand, the prison guard rapped on the cell doors one at a time with a wooden spoon and hollered, "It's mealtime!"

The guard was adept at this duty and swiftly dished out the broth and rice, filling the bowls to the brim without losing a drop. Upon hearing his voice, Han Jin hurried over to the cell door and reached for the bowl. But before his fingers so much as brushed it, another jailer passing by behind kicked the bowl over, spilling the contents over the ground.

Han Jin was so hungry his stomach ached. He dropped to his knees and pinched at the rice on the ground with his fingers, desperately shoving it into his mouth. Grains of sand and dirt clung to the rice, and even a few tiny rocks, which made his teeth ache as he ground down on them. He pressed his head against the bars and reached into his mouth with a dirty hand to extract the stones.

As he did, he saw a pair of legs stop outside the door.

Han Jin cautiously glanced up through the bars.

Gao Zhongxiong, who had only meant to come peek at his former master, had never expected to find Han Jin reduced to such a state.

Han Jin was Han Cheng's younger brother, known as a free-spirited young master in Qudu. He had succeeded Xi Gu'an as the Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalion and had even waded into the waters himself during the incident with the public ditches. At that time, he had respected Xiao Chiye greatly.

Gao Zhongxiong felt a lump in his throat. Several times, he made to speak, but words failed him.

Han Jin looked blankly at Gao Zhongxiong, then pressed his face to the bars and asked tearfully, "Is my elder brother here? Tell me, has my brother come?"

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Chapter 160:
Hearsay

SHOCKED, Gao Zhongxiong stepped backward until he bumped into the bars behind him.

Han Jin couldn't even stand mosquito bites during military campaigns; how could he endure the dirty conditions of a prison? Scrambling on the ground for scraps like this went against his very nature. When he saw Gao Zhongxiong's expression, he burst out wailing, "You treacherous man! I'm in this state because of you!"

Not daring to respond, Gao Zhongxiong stuck close to the opposite bars as he headed for the exit. Consumed with hatred, Han Jin launched into a torrent of curses. "You threw in your lot with that traitor Shen. Fucking shameless! A disloyal, turncoat slave who panders to a traitor! Gao Zhongxiong, you're on your own now! Don't you dare run! Come back, you—"

Gao Zhongxiong cut a sorry figure indeed as he pushed the prison door open and fled that relentless, haunting voice. Outside, the chilly wind gnawed at his back. All scholars cherished their reputations. Who didn't wish to go down in history as an honorable man of letters unsullied by politics? The words *disloyal*, *turncoat slave* had dealt him such a blow he swayed on his feet. Tens of thousands of grievances crowded in his heart; with nowhere to vent, they congealed into a surge of nausea so overwhelming he grabbed at the wall and threw up.

He vomited everything he had consumed that day, heaving until only acid was left. He leaned against the wall, gradually sliding to the ground. As he tipped his head up toward the vast sky, he thought of his family back in Yuzhou. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, but the tears streaming down his cheeks wouldn't stop. He wiped them with his sleeve instead. Gao Zhongxiong wrapped his arms around himself, curled up in a corner, and sobbed silently. What sort of person would be willing to give up his dignity and bow to power for a pittance?

Not Gao Zhongxiong—but without this pittance, he would die. To find a way out for himself, he had cast aside the very last of his pride. Had anyone told him five years ago that he would bow obsequiously to yamen staff and beg for a clerical position in a small prefectural administration, he would have said he'd rather die. But now he'd done more than that: He had learned how to flatter others for the smallest of rewards.

Some time later, Gao Zhongxiong got up, tidied himself, and edged along the wall as he made his way out onto the streets. As he approached the yamen, he had the sense that the whispers he heard were directed at him, but he didn't feel a thing. It was just as Yao Wenyu had said: The past was a dream. He, too, had woken up.

"This one is Gao Zhongxiong, and my humble courtesy name is Shenwei." Gao Zhongxiong strode into the yamen and bowed. "It is on the personal recommendation of the vice commander that I've come to offer my writing skills for the yamen's use. In the future, I shall be responsible for drafting up all the official proclamations and public notices required by the yamen."

The end of the eighth month came in a blink. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai returned from their trip to Huaizhou. The negotiations had gone smoothly, but one thing had stood out as odd: The attitude of the Luoxia Pass commander had been most peculiar when they crossed Luoxia Pass on the way back, far more cordial than the first time they passed through on the way to Huaizhou.

"That commandant from Luoxia Pass was digging for information on our vice commander," Yu Xiaozai explained. "He made several inquiries regarding the vice commander's marriage."

"He couldn't be trying to play matchmaker for the vice commander, could he?" Thinking of Xiao Chiye, Zhou Gui blurted, "How did you answer?"

"At first I wanted to say the vice commander was spoken for." Yu Xiaozai had grown much tanner on this trip. "But Chengfeng advised me not to, so I simply said he was still unmarried."

Perhaps Zhou Gui and Yu Xiaozai didn’t understand, but Kong Ling was a discerning man. He had heard that the Heir Consort of Libei had visited Cizhou, and had paid special attention to Luoxia Pass’s attitude on their return journey. He had a good idea of the reason for the change—no doubt Libei had reached out to the commandant in advance. The only thing he didn’t know was whether it was the prince or the heir seeking information on Shen Zechuan.

Kong Ling picked up his teacup. “The vice commander isn’t married. It’s better to state things as they are; anything else provides fodder for gossip and may lead to misunderstandings.”

Zhou Gui was about to bring up all that had happened with the screening of the clerks when Qiao Tianya lifted the curtains. The men rose in unison. “Vice Commander.”

It was raining today, and Shen Zechuan had walked the whole way over from his manor. Even with an umbrella, it was inevitable he would get wet. In contrast, Yao Wenyu was bundled securely in a cloak as he was pushed in. Yet the layers didn’t conceal his unnatural thinness; even in the wheelchair, he seemed insubstantial. Bringing up the rear was Gao Zhongxiong, dressed simply, with a pile of books in his arms and his shoulders partially wet.

“Gentlemen, please take a seat.” Shen Zechuan settled into his chair and dried his hands with his handkerchief. “The long journey must have been hard on Mister Chengfeng and Youjing. There’s no hurry to return to duty so soon. You must take a few days’ break.”

Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai both gave their thanks.

“Shenwei, do sit. There’s no need for these formalities.” Shen Zechuan waved Gao Zhongxiong toward a chair and said to Kong Ling, “This is Shenwei, a new subordinate of mine who specializes in composition. He’s presently gaining experience in the yamen, but there are plenty of matters on which he will need Mister Chengfeng’s guidance.”

Kong Ling humbly turned the compliment aside and looked Gao Zhongxiong over. The erstwhile student had his hair up in a simple topknot

today. As he spent all day moving about the yamen, efficiency had taken precedence over style, and he no longer looked so much like a scholar.

Gao Zhongxiong set down the books in his arms and bowed to Kong Ling in greeting. “What a great honor; Mister Chengfeng’s reputation precedes him.”

Kong Ling rose and returned the greeting.

Shen Zechuan waited until they resettled in their seats before speaking again. “Things are going smoothly in both Huaizhou and Chazhou; everyone can look forward to a good year. The new clerks have been sent off to survey the fields. To ensure the accuracy of their measurements, their first survey will be followed by two more checks. This work will likely take until the end of the year, but we should finish the survey before the snow. The household registration is complete as well, and Cizhou’s autumn harvest has been transferred into the granaries. Once snow falls, we should begin discussing the allocation of farmlands.”

Yao Wenyu took this as his cue to speak. “In the past, the land taxes and levies in Qudu were all paid in kind. After the grain was collected and put into storage, its value was carefully calculated. The labor costs of the transport office to take the grain to Qudu also had to be accounted for, so the values might not necessarily be accurate. Here in Cizhou, we can dispense with the escort and transportation of grain. However, to account for the increased expenses for upkeep of the granaries, the easiest way would be to combine the miscellaneous taxes and collect all amounts in standard taels of silver.”

“The trade of grain is not a long-term endeavor either,” Kong Ling said. “Once Chazhou gets back on its feet, the people there should be able to begin tilling their lands by the start of next spring. If they can sow all their fields, they may have a bumper harvest; at that point, they will no longer need to buy grain from us.”

“What about the other four prefectures?” Yu Xiaozai was still less familiar with Zhongbo than the rest. “I can’t imagine King Yi will be in the running for long. Fanzhou and Dengzhou are so poor the people there are eating each other, yet he’s busy bestowing awards and conferring titles on

the motley crew that passes for ministers in his court. If Chazhou no longer needs us, we can do business with them."

The others laughed.

"Youjing truly hails from the Chief Surveillance Bureau," Shen Zechuan said.

Seeing Yu Xiaozai's puzzled look, Kong Ling took pity on him: "When you see others conducting themselves dishonorably, you think first of impeachment. But remember, if they're so impoverished they're eating one another, how would they have money to buy our grain?"

"Human trafficking is rampant in Fanzhou," Zhou Gui commented. "If we try to sell them grain, they might bring children for barter. These people are incorrigible!" The mere mention of this subject filled him with contempt.

"The traffickers are indeed a problem," Yao Wenyu said, "but the root of it lies with Mount Luo. As for King Yi, he must live at all costs." He relaxed slightly and revealed a smile. "He is our bulwark in the south. Without him, we'll come face to face with Qi Zhuyin."

"Speaking of the grand marshal." Yu Xiaozai rolled up his cuffs. "That reminds me—I heard some news. During the wedding ceremony for Qi Shiyu and Third Lady Hua, the old marshal was apparently so dazzled by his bride's beauty during the ceremony that he collapsed on the spot."

Zhou Gui was stunned. "He collapsed?"

"He had a stroke!" Yu Xiaozai exclaimed.

Whether Qi Shiyu's stroke was genuine or not, he clearly wouldn't be sharing a bed with Hua Xiangyi any time soon. The empress dowager had managed to become in-laws with Qidong, but that was the limit of her power. If Hua Xiangyi didn't beget a male heir, Qi Zhuyin would retain her position as grand marshal. With her new stepmother in her hands, Qi Zhuyin had a legitimate reason to hold her brothers in check.

"Man proposes, heaven disposes," Zhou Gui lamented. "How fortunate Qi Zhuyin is not a man."

They laughed and moved on to other topics. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai had just returned that day; Shen Zechuan couldn't in good conscience let them sit and chat the entire night. He dismissed them soon after midnight.

Zhou Gui personally saw Kong Ling back to his courtyard and gave him a concise account of the clerk screening incident on the way. "He executed the advisor who took bribes. Since then, the yamen has been peaceful. But some new rumors have been popping up recently: They're saying the vice commander came to Cizhou to *coerce* me. Can you believe it? Heaven knows I can't eat or sleep well these days—I worry such words will make their way to the vice commander's ears and create a rift between us."

Kong Ling held the umbrella steady over their heads. "I advised you long ago to dispense with the title of prefect. If this had played out before someone more paranoid, we would have already lost the vice commander's trust."

"But…" Zhou Gui fretted, "I don't know what to change it to!"

"It doesn't matter what you change it to. What's important is your attitude." Kong Ling tilted the umbrella to allow Zhou Gui to raise the lantern. "Cizhou has already established itself as a regional power. The matter of its leadership can no longer be left ambiguous. You may not intend it, but rumors only grow. You must draw a clear line between master and subordinate, as soon as possible, and make it plain to all and sundry that Cizhou has changed hands."

As they conversed, the two men climbed the steps to Kong Ling's residence. Their attendants trailed behind them. Before Kong Ling stepped onto the walkway, he turned and motioned for them to keep their distance.

"It's not appropriate to call him the Provincial Administration Commissioner, nor to call him the supreme commander. Think of a title for me," Zhou Gui said, following him impatiently. "And I'll have it done tomorrow morning."

"Those are all titles bestowed by Qudu; of course they're not appropriate." Kong Ling couldn't think of one on the spot either. He stood

for a moment, struggling to think, then finally said, “Shen Wei was Prince of Jianxing, but he was stripped of his noble rank and title. We can’t allow any association between him and the vice commander.”

They stood side by side in the chill night air, letting the wind rustle their clothes; both shivered simultaneously. Tired and cold, Kong Ling shooed Zhou Gui off, saying, “Go back and think of a title yourself.”

Two days later, Zhou Gui submitted a document with the request to change Shen Zechuan’s title of Vice Commander to Prefectural Governor. He’d initially meant to address him simply as “Shen-jun”[1] or “Governor Shen,” but the name Shen was associated too closely with Shen Wei, and thus he chose to add a more neutral “Prefectural.” In any case, adding “Prefectural” made the title more flexible; it could be revised in the future if any change needed to be made. His proposal marked the first time Cizhou explicitly recognized Shen Zechuan as the de facto leader of the prefecture. Meanwhile, Zhou Gui demoted himself from his original position of prefect and became Shen Zechuan’s subordinate.

When the change was made public, King Yi of Fanzhou was first to become anxious upon hearing the news. He issued several notices in succession angrily denouncing Zhou Gui for bending the knee to the traitor’s son. But Cizhou now had Gao Zhongxiong, an eloquent writer of quick wit who could convince anyone that black was white.

Gao Zhongxiong wrote pamphlet upon pamphlet condemning King Yi for his heartless disregard for the lives of the commoners in Fanzhou in prioritizing the wasteful construction of extravagant buildings for his own enjoyment. At the same time, he also composed a ballad for distribution to Zhongbo’s four eastern prefectures. It told the story of how Shen Zechuan had suffered and been injured while traveling thousands of li to deliver lifesaving grain to Chazhou. So touching was this tale that it moved all who heard it to tears. The further the story spread, the more exaggerated it became; by the time the ballad reached Xiao Fangxu’s ears, Shen Zechuan had apparently sustained grave wounds and had nearly lost an arm amid his valiant struggle.

Shocked, Xiao Fangxu ran out of his tent and shook Xiao Chiye awake in the middle of the night, exclaiming, “He lost an arm?!”

Xiao Chiye, who had been diligently running mission after mission for half a month without rest, had only just drifted off when his old man yanked him up. He was still half-asleep, so Xiao Fangxu shook him and asked the question again.

Annoyed at the jostling, Xiao Chiye asked hoarsely, “Wh-who lost an arm?”

“Shen Zechuan!”

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Chapter 161:
Sunset Glow

IT WAS AS THOUGH he had been doused with a bucket of icy water. Xiao Chiye wasn't just awake, his hair was standing on end. He sat up and stared at Xiao Fangxu, yet his mind was completely blank, as if he'd been punched so hard even the insides of his chest had turned to mush. He shoved Xiao Fangxu aside and tumbled off the cot to pull on his boots, but crashed against the corner of the table so hard he almost couldn't get up. And his damn boots were nowhere to be found.

Chen Yang and Gu Jin, keeping watch outside the tent, heard the flap being lifted; out stumbled Xiao Chiye, resembling a wandering ghost with one boot on and one foot bare. He didn't even have his outer robe as he rushed to untie Snowcrest's reins.

Gu Jin was quickest to react. He rushed forward to grab the reins and called, "Master!"

Chen Yang followed just behind, intending to head inside to look for the robe and boots.

Xiao Fangxu stepped out, bewildered. "You didn't know? Didn't this happen a long time ago? When he went to Chazhou."

Observing Xiao Fangxu's expression, realization dawned on Chen Yang. He slapped his forehead and turned around, shouting, "Chazhou! Master, it was from Chazhou! Gongzi is fine!"

The strident shouts shocked Xiao Chiye's drifting soul back into his body. He turned and made a beeline for Xiao Fangxu, so anxious his eyes had gone red. When he was a few paces away, he spun around on the spot once before finally wiping his face as he exclaimed, "Good grief, my own damn father!"

The scabs on Shen Zechuan's palm had fallen off, leaving only a scar behind.

After the eighth month passed, the rain in Cizhou ceased. The frost came heavier, and the weather grew colder. Yao Wenyu, having caught a small chill in recent days, remained indoors with a hand warmer and rarely ventured outside. Fei Sheng continued to follow Shen Zechuan around, while Li Xiong followed Ding Tao, and hardly ever mentioned Lei Jingzhe.

“Is Han Jin still in prison?” Shen Zechuan had finished his medicine; he was gazing out the window and questioned Fei Sheng almost idly.

“He is,” Fei Sheng confirmed. “Master is benevolent to have spared his life, yet he continues to wail all day without so much as a word of repentance.”

Shen Zechuan turned the porcelain bowl in his hand and studied the pattern. “Well, he is Han Cheng’s younger brother.”

Fei Sheng lowered his eyes and unconsciously shivered.

Han Cheng had killed Qi Huilian right in the middle of the street. Based on everything he’d deciphered about Shen Zechuan’s temper, Fei Sheng had to assume Shen Zechuan was keeping Han Jin alive not to exert leverage over Qudu, but for some greater purpose. What this was, Fei Sheng didn’t dare guess and had no wish to know. As a personal guard, he was merely Shen Zechuan’s dagger. Shen Zechuan’s wish was his command.

Shen Zechuan raised his eyes, looking out the window at the cold rays of sunlight spilling over the ground and leaving tear-stained trails through the frost. He flashed an enigmatic smile. “Release him.”

Fei Sheng murmured acknowledgment.

“Give him a bath and a change of clothes, then feed him and offer him a soft bed,” Shen Zechuan added. “He doesn’t need to do anything. Let him play to his heart’s content.”

Fei Sheng didn’t dare object and merely nodded before taking his leave. The moment he left, Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain and entered.

“A letter from Libei.” Qiao Tianya set the envelope on Shen Zechuan’s desk. “Sent posthaste. It must be an important message for Master.”

“Is Yuanzhuo doing any better?” Shen Zechuan asked as he opened the letter.

Before Qiao Tianya could reply, he saw Shen Zechuan’s stunned expression. He appeared to read the letter several times.

“It’s about the winter trade market.” Shen Zechuan paused. “I have to go to the front lines in person to speak with the Prince of Libei.”

The weather in Libei was capricious. Bright, clear days were scarce in autumn, but the instant the sun did appear, it would become so hot one itched to strip off their clothes.

Xiao Chiye had returned to the front lines again at the end of the eighth month, and he remained there for the time being. After his defeat, he hadn’t rested for a moment. Whether it was heading north to transport military supplies or riding west to contact the homeland, he’d personally led his men on every trip. Xiao Fangxu’s castigation seemed to have sanded down all his rough edges, to the point that he now willingly served as a minor supplies general.

When Chen Yang went to fetch water, he saw Xiao Chiye standing amid the withered yellow grass, breaking a horse. Or rather, he was meant to be breaking it, but in reality, Xiao Chiye was being far gentler than usual with this animal. Snow-white with a patch of black on its chest—it was the horse Lu Yizhi had set aside for Xiao Chiye’s wife. For the past month, Xiao Chiye had brought the horse with him everywhere while carrying out his assignments. He wanted to train it himself.

Xiao Fangxu came riding over from the opposite direction, and Meng swooped down through the wind and brushed past Xiao Fangxu, ruffling his hair. He then took off again, gliding along the tips of the grass before soaring into the air, where he wheeled once before flying away.

Xiao Fangxu dismounted and threw his reins to the deputy general behind him. He took off his helmet, spat out the grit in his mouth, and narrowed his eyes as he watched Xiao Chiye. After a moment, he removed his heavy armor and took the saddle off his horse. He then flipped back atop it, riding bare-back, and beckoned Xiao Chiye over.

Zuo Qianqiu leaned over the paddock railing, his white hair fluttering in the wind as he watched father and son challenging each other. Wu Ziyu ran over and leapt up to straddle the railing. Behind him, the men of the Libei Armored Cavalry and Imperial Army crowded around, packed like sardines along the rails.

Tantai Hu was so squashed he couldn't even free his hands; he craned his neck and hollered, "What's this about?!"

Wu Ziyu waved the steamed bun he was eating and shouted hoarsely over the din, "If Er-gongzi wins today, the supply squadron will be treated like lords this month! They'll have to give us two more scoops for our meals!"

Zuo Qianqiu laughed at this back-and-forth. "It'll be a few years more before A-Ye can defeat his old man."

"Er-gongzi won't let us down!" Tantai Hu cried, wiping at the sweat that had trickled down his cheek. His face shone dark and flushed in the scorching heat.

"What if the prince wins?" Zuo Qianqiu asked.

Chen Yang was about to answer when Tantai Hu shouted over him, "Then we'll run along the grassland and bark—"

Wu Ziyu and Gu Jin leapt forward to clap their hands over his mouth.

But Zuo Qianqiu didn't let the opportunity slip. "Fine! A-Ye, you hear that? If you lose to your father today, your whole squad will have to bark for us!"

Xiao Chiye lifted his fingers and whistled, and Snowcrest trotted to his side. He mounted his horse and asked Xiao Fangxu, "Where to?"

Seeming to think for a moment, Xiao Fangxu repeated, "Where to…" But before the words had fully left his mouth, he had set his heels to his horse's sides and shot off into the distance.

The Imperial Army booed. Tantai Hu struggled to free his mouth and exclaimed, "His Lordship cheated!"

Snowcrest sprang forward like a black arrow leaving the bowstring, kicking up a gust in its wake. The sun in that clear sky was blinding on the horizon, and the backs of father and son as they galloped away were almost identical. Meng broke through the clouds and chased after them, sticking close to Xiao Chiye as he looked down upon that pair of dark arrows, one in front and one behind. Blades of grass went flying under the horses' hooves, while the wind stirred the endless expanse of the plain, bending the stalks with its passage. They rode through the undulating grass like a pair of stars, one large and one small, falling into the waves of the ocean, leaving a long trail in their wake as they cut through the grasslands.

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Xiao Chiye gazed at Xiao Fangxu's back, the wind rustling in his ears.

Xiao Fangxu hadn't grown old. How could he? He looked so strong and robust, no different than he had twenty years ago when he would lift one son in each arm, his laughter booming over the grasslands as he tossed them until they cried.

Gradually, Xiao Chiye caught up to him. Snowcrest was sturdier and younger than the horse beneath Xiao Fangxu. It charged forth with vigor, eyes focused only on what lay ahead, as if nothing could stop it.

Slowly the two came neck and neck, both horses running until they were lathered. The sun blazed overhead, searing the backs of both horses and riders. Perhaps this would be the last day of scorching sun in Libei this year.

A stone monument marked the finishing point, engraved with the names of the Libei Armored Cavalry who had died in battle the previous year, along with the falcons fallen with them and the battle steeds that had carried them. At the very last moment, just as their horses' hooves stretched out toward the shadow of the marker, Meng beat them to it and darted across the finish line. He circled once before landing on the monument, claiming first place.

"The falcon is mine." Xiao Chiye slowed down. "So I win."

"The land is mine." Xiao Fangxu wheeled the horse around and pointed at his feet. "I was here eight hundred years earlier than you."

Xiao Chiye coolly ignored this statement.

They dismounted. The sun was making its downward descent in the west. Xiao Fangxu climbed the low stone steps and stood before the monument, then reached out to wipe away the dust. The wind was strong here. It tousled the hair at his temples, revealing streaks of white. "Herein lie my brothers."

Xiao Chiye came up and stood beside him.

"Ten years ago, I brought your brother here." Xiao Fangxu pointed to a spot on the stone. "There was a boy here with the rather unique name of

Suining. He was the same age as your brother."

Old names on the monument were scraped off every year and replaced with new ones. The act signified that generation after generation of the Libei Armored Cavalry had existed here, and that generation after generation had vanished here. With its back to the Hongyan Mountains, the stone monument lay in eternal rest. The souls it memorialized were the Hongyan Mountains' wind, and the Hongyan Mountains' stars.

"I want to be right here." Xiao Chiye pointed to the center. "It's a spacious spot; the location is good, and you can see far into the distance."

"That's my spot," Xiao Fangxu said pettily. "I want all the spots here."

"What about my mother?" Xiao Chiye turned his head to scrutinize Xiao Fangxu. "You'll be leaving her alone in the homeland."

Xiao Fangxu didn't respond. He gazed past the monument toward the Hongyan Mountains. Then, as if dazzled by the setting sun, he turned away, back toward the Libei homeland. He could barely open his eyes for the wind. "We can look at each other from afar—eyes to eyes, forevermore."

Xiao Chiye followed his gaze.

"It is here we are born, and here we will die. The people of Libei lie in the mountains and rivers with their faces tipped to the blazing sun. It doesn't matter if they're men or women; the iron bones in this sunlight belong to unyielding heroes." Xiao Fangxu opened his palm, and the wind brushed his skin so gently it felt like the silky black hair of his wife. This was the only indulgence he had allowed himself in the past decades. "One day, I will return to her embrace."

Xiao Chiye looked out at the waves of billowing grass; there seemed to be no end to that yellow sea. The sorrow of parting and the joy of reunion that belonged to every person alive was merely a fleeting moment in the timelessness of the universe. In the blink of an eye, they, too, would disintegrate. From then on, all would be silent, every trace of the time they'd shared gone.

How precious was an encounter between two people.

Xiao Fangxu turned and punched Xiao Chiye on the shoulder, then pulled his son into a tight hug. But he let go quickly and said, “If you want to surpass me, you still need a few years!”

“Who knows?” Xiao Chiye patted his own chest and straightened to his full height.

Xiao Fangxu took a few steps and bent as if to pick something off the ground. Being pelted with horse dung had left Xiao Chiye with lasting trauma; he promptly turned tail and ran. Xiao Fangxu burst out laughing.

The wind was still blowing as father and son made their way back, bathed in the glow of the setting sun.

Daylight lingered on the horizon as they returned the horses to the paddock. Drenched in sweat, Xiao Chiye stripped off his upper garments and went down to the river to bathe. The surface of the water glimmered in the dying light. As he raised the wooden bucket to pour water over himself, ripples of gold danced over the muscles on his back.

Xiao Chiye bent and rinsed his dented armguard in the river. The iron had warped to the point it was no longer usable, but he hadn’t changed it out. When he took it out of the water, he untied the frayed dog-hide cord and turned. “Hand me the—”

A travel-worn Shen Zechuan stood at the top of the riverbank, the sunset glow spilling over the hems of his robe, still covered with bits of grass.

Xiao Chiye had missed him so much.

And now here he stood before Xiao Chiye, in the moment before the last rays of the setting sun slipped below the edge of the world.

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Chapter 162:
Trade Market

THE DEEP BLUE DOME of heaven spread out behind Shen Zechuan. He removed his cloak, exposing the earring on his right ear as he lifted his arms. His robe's cuffs slid down to reveal the secured, snow-white sleeves of his inner garment. He was a white bird touching down for a rest in this still and silent world, commanding all of Xiao Chiye's attention in an instant.

Xiao Chiye didn't even blink. He watched Shen Zechuan descend the bank in a few steps, and unthinkingly opened his arms. Shen Zechuan rushed into his embrace. The impact sent him stumbling back half a step; he took this white bird into his bosom, crushing him in a tight hug. The swift-running river crashed into their legs, sending up sprays of water.

"You scared me." Recovering from his astonishment, Xiao Chiye lifted Shen Zechuan high and threw his head back to laugh. "You fell from the sky!"

Shen Zechuan was a little short of breath. "I'm here for an inspection."

Xiao Chiye lifted his hand to Shen Zechuan's cheek, then slid it to the back of Shen Zechuan's head and held him still for a kiss. Dusk closed in on the mountains and waters around them, their lips holding the last warmth of the evening glow. Shen Zechuan's hands came up to cup Xiao Chiye's cheeks as he responded passionately.

The shimmer on the surface of the water faded, and the gathering darkness blurred the boundary between heaven and earth. They clung close, ever so intimate as they unburdened themselves of their desperate loneliness. Xiao Chiye kissed him so hard Shen Zechuan sucked in a breath when they parted, licking the spot nearly torn by Xiao Chiye's sharp canines.

"Inspect away." Xiao Chiye laughed. "Go on. I've already stripped for you."

Draping his arms around Xiao Chiye's neck, Shen Zechuan tapped his sturdy back with his dangling fan. "I disappeared without a trace the moment I stepped off the carriage. I haven't even met His Lordship. I'll inspect you tonight."

"Aha…" Xiao Chiye dragged out the word and held Shen Zechuan right where he wanted him. Bitterly, he said, "So you're here to see my father."

Shen Zechuan swung his folding fan. "That's just something I have to do along the way. My heart is all here."

Carrying Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye waded through the water toward the riverbank. "I don't believe you."

Shen Zechuan felt that Xiao Chiye looked especially dashing this way. When Xiao Chiye set him down, he leaned back to gaze at him. Xiao Chiye placed his palm against Shen Zechuan's forehead and stretched out his arm to put a little distance between them.

"You should've seized the chance while you had it." Xiao Chiye bent down for his clothes. "That's all I'm showing you."

"Then I suppose I'll be leaving," Shen Zechuan teased.

Xiao Chiye picked up his robe and jerked his chin toward the hill. "Go ahead."

Shen Zechuan nodded and took a few small steps backward. Seeing that Xiao Chiye didn't budge, he turned around in earnest, but before he had taken a full stride forward, Xiao Chiye pulled him back, covering his head with the robe and kissing him until a tingle ran up Shen Zechuan's spine.

The wide robe that enveloped them was covered in Xiao Chiye's scent, the cool and refreshing fragrance engulfing Shen Zechuan. In the darkness afforded by that thin film of fabric, he revealed his avaricious nature, breathing hotly to seduce Xiao Chiye before finally whispering in his ear, "*Your father is coming*."

The group of well-meaning guards who had been squatting tactfully behind the slope started coughing loudly.

Xiao Chiye pulled back in the nick of time, tearing the robe off them both in a fit of pique.

Xiao Fangxu had long known of Shen Zechuan's arrival, but he hadn't communicated this fact to Xiao Chiye. The main tent was crowded with people now. The commanding generals from Base Camp, Second Sand Camp, and the Liuyang Camps were all present, in the midst of discussing news from the homeland.

"If the Biansha troops don't withdraw soon, this war will go into the winter." The commanding general of Second Sand Camp was a man named Jiang Sheng; he'd been wounded some days back, and his shoulders were still wrapped in gauze. "If we're going to keep up our current momentum through the winter, we need to consider deploying more craftsmen to the battalions on the front lines. We can't move fast enough if we have to rely on the supply squadron to deliver fresh equipment every time ours wears down."

"Deploying more craftsmen is an option." Zuo Qianqiu was warming himself by the fire. "But we'll also need to feed them. If we transfer everyone to the front lines, there'll be no one back at home to till the fields next spring."

Now that Libei had lost access to Juexi's granaries, its provisions were cut in half. They had to rely on the military fields in Libei to survive. The ability to feed their soldiers was something that would determine success or failure in battle.

"The heir has suggested establishing a new supply camp behind Second Sand Camp," Zhao Hui said. "This will allow us to assist Border Camp to the south and meet the needs of the front lines faster. In times of emergency, our people back home will scrimp and save to supply the front line."

"Winter is around the corner, and the coats have yet to be distributed." Jiang Sheng knew everyone was in a difficult position; he couldn't push too hard. He frowned in silence for a moment. "The heir consort is leading the old and infirm, plus all the women and children, to

hasten the production of winter coats back in the homeland. The cotton used to fill them was given to us by Luoxia Pass. We're in for a tough time this year. If we can't survive this winter, we can forget about plans for next year."

"You're a veteran general." Xiao Fangxu took a drink from his cup of hot milk. "Don't lose heart. The men on the front lines are still fighting. If it's rough going for us, it'll be even tougher on the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Amur still hasn't become their Great King. Out of the twelve, only six tribes have truly pledged allegiance to him. The remaining tribes are merely hoping for a share of the spoils. They'll take the risk with him for now. But when it comes down to it, they may not be willing to stake everything on him."

"Biansha has the momentum this year," Zhao Hui said. "They've surely come prepared."

"No doubt they've been planning this push for a long time." Zuo Qianqiu turned his palms over and looked down before continuing. "In the third year of Xiande, Amur colluded with our own ministers and broke through Zhongbo's defenses. Everything went too smoothly for him then; he had a true taste of victory. It's surprising that he's concentrating his attacks on a difficult territory like Libei. But from this, we can guess he's harboring real intentions of invading Great Zhou. This time, he wants to first destroy the wall that is Libei to prevent himself from getting caught the same way."

"Someone out there is supplying grain to Amur." Xiao Fangxu's eyes were sharp. "When Jiming was taken out of commission thanks to the moldy provisions, Amur transferred Hassen north immediately. If you told me he didn't know in advance, I wouldn't believe you. Amur's contact is still hiding in Great Zhou. We can thank our lucky stars Qudu doesn't have Libei's military maps. A-Ye rebelled at the start of spring. This was no bad thing—in fact, he did well. If Libei had remained under Qudu's control, we'd be worrying about more than provisions right now. It's easier to dodge a spear in the open than ward off an arrow in the dark. Entrusting our backs to Qudu is too dangerous."

Jiang Sheng finally revealed a hint of a smile, shaking his head. “With no more inspector eunuchs breathing down our necks, it’s been a much more satisfying fight.”

“The provisions issue is one that can be solved.” Xiao Fangxu set down his bowl. “And I’ve found just the man to solve it.”

Zuo Qianqiu laughed and rose to his feet. “All right then. Let me invite this young friend of yours in.”

It took all of Wu Ziyu’s discipline not to brazenly stare at Shen Zechuan. Squashing his curiosity, he followed behind Tantai Hu and asked, “Is that him?”

“Just address him as Gongzi later,” Tantai Hu whispered back.

Shen Zechuan’s head was tilted as he listened to Fei Sheng. Wu Ziyu couldn’t tell from his side profile if Shen Zechuan was happy or not, but simply standing there, he resembled a portrait limned in brilliant colors. The base was a pure white, yet the delicate hues of his features were so ravishing they held the viewer in thrall. One didn’t dare shift their eyes away, but looking too long inexplicably gave one a chill. It wasn’t an oppressive coldness; it merely raced up one’s spine, so swift it gave no indication of its advance. By the time realization dawned, the viewer instinctively sensed danger and shied away from his cutting brilliance.

Ding Tao was, as ever, a chatterbox; he popped out his head to whisper, “See that jade earring? Our master polished it *personally*. Gongzi wears it every day.”

The jade drop adorned his right ear. Whether Shen Zechuan was the one who became the jade earring, or whether it became him, was a matter still up for debate. Its presence was a needless warning, its smooth luster concealing Xiao Chiye’s naked possessiveness, announcing to the world that no one other than Xiao Chiye could touch this man.

Wu Ziyu had only just burrowed through the crowd; he hadn’t yet decided how he should greet Shen Zechuan. But seeing as everyone around

him behaved as they normally did, he did the same, his prying gaze warded off by that small white earring.

By the time Shen Zechuan arrived to meet with Xiao Fangxu, it was nearing midnight. Chen Yang lifted the tent flap to let him enter.

Xiao Fangxu was initially sitting with one leg propped on the other, but when he saw that figure in white step inside, he immediately sat up straight. Then, feeling he was acting too unnatural, he attempted to cover it up by bracing his hands on his knees to appear more imposing as he looked sternly over at Shen Zechuan.

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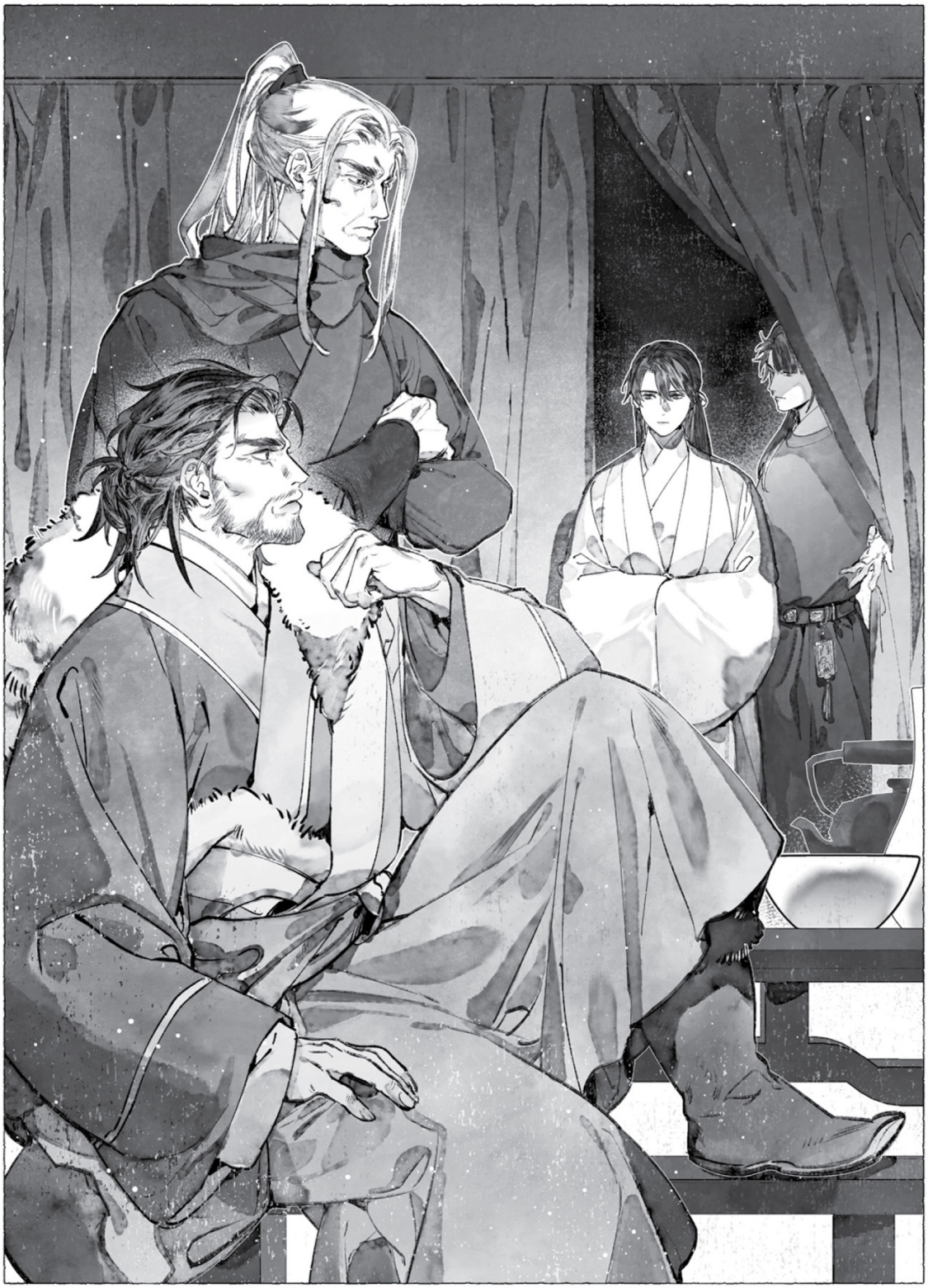

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“Apologies for keeping you waiting.” Zuo Qianqiu guided Shen Zechuan to a seat. “It’s a tough journey here. Come, have a meal with us first. We’ll talk as we eat.”

He turned his head and shot Xiao Fangxu a meaningful glance.

Xiao Fangxu scrutinized Shen Zechuan. He remembered this face, but the aura that accompanied it was entirely different from the young man he had seen just a year ago. *Fine*, he thought. *He really is damn good-looking.*

“Sit,” Xiao Fangxu said coolly.

Gu Jin served tea, and Chen Yang brought out the food. It was a simple meal: a large platter of lamb stew, tea mixed with fresh milk, piping-hot flatbread, and cabbage and other green vegetables commonly seen at the front lines.

Shen Zechuan stared at the portions laid out before him. They had clearly overestimated him.

Zuo Qianqiu gestured for Shen Zechuan to dig in as he tore into his own flatbread. “It’s army food, I’m afraid. We wanted to welcome you with a meal, but we’ve not much to offer, so this will have to do. If we can establish a truce with Biansha next year, we’ll host you properly back in the homeland.”

Shen Zechuan found this comment strange. He was here to discuss the Libei trade market and the use of Libei’s roads. Since Xiao Fangxu was willing to meet him, no matter how he looked at it, their hospitality was perfectly adequate.

“It’s been half a year since we saw each other. When we met in Qudu the last time, you weren’t so thin,” Zuo Qianqiu said. “Is your shifu well?”

Shen Zechuan hadn’t yet touched the food. He nodded and replied, “Shifu has been in good health and leads a leisurely life in Cizhou. He thinks of you often. Before I came, he specially instructed me to deliver a letter on his behalf.” He turned back and called, “Fei Sheng.”

Fei Sheng handed the letter over to Chen Yang. As Zuo Qianqiu and Shen Zechuan exchanged pleasantries, Xiao Fangxu sliced off a piece of

lamb with a dagger. “So you’re here to discuss the trade market.”

“That’s right,” Shen Zechuan replied. “I also wanted to speak to your Lordship about the roads.”

“Access to Libei’s roads will not be granted for free.” Xiao Fangxu placed the lamb on his plate. “You’re welcome to use them as long as you can afford the price. But the trade market is not open to outsiders.”

“If Your Lordship doesn’t permit outsiders to participate in the trade market, it will be left vacant this year.” Shen Zechuan tasted the flatbread before continuing, “The fighting is intense this year, and the grasslands of the Huiyan tribe that participates in your market have been commandeered by the Hanma tribe. The Huiyan tribe is waiting to exchange their remaining cattle and sheep for grain at the trade market just to get through the winter. If the trade market doesn’t open, thousands will starve to death in the snow.”

“The fact that Libei is willing to vacate land for the Huiyan tribe to graze their livestock is already a magnanimous gesture,” Xiao Fangxu replied. “They know we’re in a difficult spot this year.” He wiped the dagger clean and looked at Shen Zechuan. “Do you know what it means to let you into the trade market? It would mean your men would move freely in and out of Libei this whole winter. We are at war. If any of the Mount Luo bandits who defected to Biansha find their way in, are you bold enough to bear the consequences?”

“I’m not.” Shen Zechuan looked straight into Xiao Fangxu’s eyes. “Which is why I will eliminate all possibility of it.”

Xiao Fangxu tossed the dagger onto his tray. “Don’t say things like that to me. I don’t believe it.”

“What if I gave Your Lordship the authority to inspect everything that passes through?” Shen Zechuan grasped his handkerchief and slowly smiled. “Cizhou will provide the grain, and Libei will have the final say over how it’s delivered.”

“What do you want in exchange?” Xiao Fangxu asked, grave. “This still isn’t a good deal for you.”

“I want a road.” Shen Zechuan raised a finger and drew a line in the air. “A commercial trade road that runs through the northeastern territories of Great Zhou—one that will allow Libei and Cizhou to establish a long-term partnership, secure sufficient provisions for the Libei Armored Cavalry, and keep the Northeast Provisions Trail flowing smoothly.”

Xiao Fangxu didn’t respond. On the other side of the tent, the flap lifted, and Xiao Chiye entered.

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Chapter 163:
Boat on a River

SHEN ZECHUAN'S GAZE lingered on Xiao Chiye's body, an imperceptible tease. It lasted a split second, so fast Xiao Chiye only caught that last instant of it.

"And what does Libei get out of letting you into the trade market?" Xiao Fangxu wiped his hands clean. "Libei doesn't depend on trade for survival."

"In the past, the noble clans adopted a strategy of making a distant friend while attacking a nearby enemy in order to hold Libei in check. Libei had no friend on its southern border, leaving it vulnerable and cut off from assistance. I'm willing to connect Zhongbo and Libei once more and serve as a buffer zone between Libei and Qidong," Shen Zechuan said. "Libei is in a dangerous protracted war with Biansha. It's safer to have Zhongbo as an ally."

Xiao Chiye sat down next to Xiao Fangxu. Chen Yang presented him with a new pair of chopsticks, and he picked a piece of lamb off the plate.

Xiao Fangxu cast him a sidelong glance, then turned his attention back to Shen Zechuan. "You are not Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Your words don't represent the six prefectures of Zhongbo. You snatched Cizhou from Zhou Gui's hands using the excuse of passing through, and you subdued Luo Mu's Chazhou under the pretext of delivering grain. But King Yi of Fanzhou and Dengzhou, as well as the bandits of Mount Luo in Dunzhou and Duanzhou, are not under your control."

Regarding this, Shen Zechuan already had a scheme in mind. "King Yi is a commoner pushed to rebellion by the bandits. Between Fanzhou and Dengzhou, he has less than thirty thousand troops. He can't defeat the Biansha Horsemen to the east, and he doesn't have the guts to face Qi Zhuyin to the south. He can only set up a miniature imperial court in Fanzhou and attempt to ally with the bandits from Mount Luo. The man is a paper tiger—he only looks fierce. As for the Mount Luo bandits, they're

mired in internal strife; they no longer pose a credible threat to Zhongbo. In any case, neither they nor King Yi will negotiate with Libei. Only Cizhou comes with a sincere heart. The trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou is already taking shape, allowing Cizhou to bypass Qudu to conduct monetary transactions with Juexi. If Libei needs, Cizhou can cover the operating costs of the entire Northeast Provisions Trail."

Xiao Fangxu and Zuo Qianqiu thought at the same time: *He's filthy rich!*

As long as the Northeast Provisions Trail was operational, Zhongbo could supply Libei with military provisions. Shen Zechuan's greatest assets in Juexi lay in the Xi Clan's businesses. He had been set on using the Northeast Provisions Trail before he ever left Qudu. The military provisions case had brought to light the embezzlement of grain in Juexi, but it had also shown Shen Zechuan a loophole. In the past, Xi Hongxuan routed grain through the Hezhou waterways and was obstructed by the Hua Clan of Dicheng to the north. But now that Shen Zechuan had Huaizhou's cooperation, he could purchase grain directly from Juexi.

"On another note," Shen Zechuan said, changing the subject. "I had hoped the newly established garrison troops of the six prefectures might receive guidance from the Libei Armored Cavalry, and purchase battle steeds from the Hongyan Mountains in the future."

This time, it was not only Xiao Fangxu who looked toward him; even Xiao Chiye turned his head.

"You want to establish a cavalry?" Xiao Fangxu's interest was piqued. "In Zhongbo—along the Chashi River?"

Shen Zechuan took a sip of the hot milk to warm himself. "Duanzhou needs a cavalry."

Most of Zhongbo had no natural grasslands for grazing; the garrisons of the six prefectures comprised mainly infantry. But Zhongbo's terrain didn't enjoy the same natural geographical advantage as Qidong, which relied on the two cinch points of Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass for protection. The land along the Chashi River was open and exposed, and the line of defense Duanzhou had established there couldn't withstand the

repeated incursions of the Biansha Horsemen. The rebuilding of these military defenses was long overdue.

"My elder brother's name was Ji Mu," Shen Zechuan said. "He was a squad commander in the Duanzhou Garrison Troops when the Biansha Horsemen attacked." He paused. "He was familiar with the area along the Chashi River. Like Libei, it's a wide expanse of flatlands. The defensive camps there at the time didn't have the beacon towers of the Bianjun Commandery, which stretch for tens of thousands of li, nor did they have the falcon reconnaissance of Libei. When the Biansha Horsemen forded the river, there was no time for the defenders to pass on any message at all."

This was one of the principal reasons for the fall of Duanzhou. The relay horses along the public roads couldn't outrun the Biansha Horsemen; they were slaughtered en route to their destinations. With no one to communicate military intelligence, the cities behind Duanzhou received no news. They didn't learn of the attack until the cities' gates were broken down, and the Biansha Horsemen's scimitars were right in their faces. What had followed was the massacre of the cities.

Ji Mu had died with a grievance.

All thirty thousand garrison soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole had died unjust deaths. They had possessed the determination to die protecting their home and country, but they'd never had the opportunity. Heavy snow had blanketed the Chashi Sinkhole; from then on, the men of Zhongbo had become the stray dogs of the Zhou empire.

"Duanzhou needs a light cavalry," Shen Zechuan said firmly. "After the defeat, the area along the Chashi River fell into the hands of the Biansha people. Whatever was left of Duanzhou's defensive camps lapsed into disuse. To rebuild them, Duanzhou must have a light cavalry."

Xiao Fangxu stroked his chin. "If you only want to pass military information efficiently, there are plenty of options. Re-establish a dense enough cluster of relay stations along the Chashi River and build smooth enough roads for the horses, and you can be as swift as you please. But if you want a light cavalry that can rival the Biansha Horsemen, Libei can't help you."

Zuo Qianqiu nodded and addressed Shen Zechuan. “The Biansha Horsemen’s fierce strength lies not only in their speed but in their horsemanship. They’re adept riders, more so than any of Great Zhou’s soldiers; even the Libei Armored Cavalry cannot compare to them in this.”

“You should know a Duanzhou that relinquishes its defenses is no better than an infant in swaddling clothes,” Xiao Fangxu agreed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Xiao Chiye stealthily push the plate of meat toward Shen Zechuan. He stomped on his son’s foot under the table.

Xiao Chiye sucked in a breath. “I think it’s—*tsk!*—feasible!”

“The hell do you know?” Xiao Fangxu grumbled.

Xiao Chiye twisted his thumb ring around twice. “In this case, I do know something.”

He looked toward Shen Zechuan again and felt a subtle itch when their gazes met; he knew exactly what Shen Zechuan was thinking.

“Why must this light cavalry compare to the Biansha Horsemen?” Xiao Chiye asked. “Even if we remove the Libei Armored Cavalry’s heavy armor from our horses, we won’t achieve the same results as them.” He felt a little lethargic after eating his fill. “Lanzhou also has the Embroidered Uniform Guard at his command. Using them purely as eyes and ears is too great a waste. But if you paired the highly trained Embroidered Uniform Guard with the best horses, they’d have a chance at breaking through Biansha’s defenses along the Chashi River.”

“How many men are there in the Embroidered Uniform Guard?” Xiao Fangxu scoffed. “On the battlefield, their numbers are like a strand of hair on an ox.”

“The Embroidered Uniform Guard in Cizhou can be expanded. And consider this organization’s selection criteria: Not only does Lanzhou have the most efficient intelligence-gatherers in Great Zhou, he also has assassins adept in the art of camouflage at his disposal,” Xiao Chiye said. “Are small numbers a shortcoming? Not always. For a light cavalry of assassins, being small in number is to their advantage. Rather than calling them a strand of hair on an ox, call them a steel needle. Use this needle in the right place, and even the Biansha vultures will fall.”

Shen Zechuan had been inspired by Xiao Jiming's combat style. Even if he were to establish camps along the Chashi River as a first line of defense, he would still lack a military force that could act as a heavy hammer the way the Libei Armored Cavalry did. As there was no way to replicate the Libei Armored Cavalry, Shen Zechuan had swapped the hammer for a needle.

In theory, a sufficiently fortified defensive wall could be built stretching from Dunzhou to Duanzhou. If Shen Zechuan shifted Zhongbo's infantry behind this wall and turned them into bowmen equipped with heavy defensive weapons, then placed a patrolling troop of light cavalry with unpredictable movements along the Chashi River, he would possess a panoramic view of everything inside and outside the wall. This cavalry—or perhaps it would be more appropriate to call them an assassination squad, evolved from the Embroidered Uniform Guard—could swiftly travel undercover and remain Shen Zechuan's eyes and ears on the ground.

Silent and omnipresent. For as long as Shen Zechuan desired, he would be able to hear everything, anywhere.

Zuo Qianqiu sucked in a breath of cold air. Having been stationed at Tianfei Watchtower for so many years, he understood best how deadly such a squad of assassins could be. The thought was enough to unnerve anyone.

Silence descended upon the tent. Everyone was waiting for Xiao Fangxu to speak. At length, he said to Shen Zechuan, "You may trade grain for the horses you want. But if you succeed in establishing this light cavalry, see that they never take a single step into Libei." He pushed his plate away, leaned his elbow on the table, and smiled at Shen Zechuan. "Or I'll kill them, and kill you."

His aura seemed to expand and bear down on Shen Zechuan, crushing him under an almost tangible weight. Before Xiao Chiye could open his mouth to speak, Shen Zechuan pressed down on his arm. He stood his ground against the king wolf's gaze and, in that endless moment, slowly replied, "Deal."

Xiao Fangxu bent a finger and flicked the rim of his bowl, retracting his imposing aura as easily as he had let it fall.

After everyone had dispersed, Xiao Fangxu sat by the fire and held his dagger over the flame.

“If you regret it,” Zuo Qianqiu said, sitting beside him, “it’s not too late to take it back.”

Light from the fire illuminated the planes of Xiao Fangxu’s face. “This boy’s too dangerous.”

“You do know who his teacher was, don’t you?” Zuo Qianqiu soothed him. “Besides, he’s Ji Gang’s disciple. He’s not bad at heart.”

“Don’t brush me off with that. Even brothers born to the same parents will differ from each other. Qi Huilian wasn’t that decent a man either.” Xiao Fangxu withdrew the dagger from the fire and caressed the blade with his thumb. “Cracks abound everywhere in this world—opportunities for cunning men to get a foothold. Men like him can’t fight battles, yet they’ll emerge to stand atop a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood.”

After a long period of silence, Zuo Qianqiu asked, “Then why are you willing to make a deal with him?”

Xiao Fangxu looked at the sliding glint on the steel as the firelight bathed it in red. Amid the soft crackle of the bonfire, he examined his own reflection in the blade. Eventually, he said, “My son has made himself into a lock.”

Shen Zechuan unfastened the clasps on his robe as he faced the candle flame, bone-weary.

He hadn’t experienced such a feeling in a very long time. It was the frustration of being called on a bluff.

Never had Shen Zechuan told anyone about his plan for Duanzhou’s light cavalry, not even Qi Huilian or Xiao Chiye. Many of his actions in the past had been rooted in impure motives. As long as he got his hands on something, he would exploit it every way he could. He called these his hypocrisies, and they had been even more atrocious before Xiao Chiye had come into the picture. That was why he could not—dared not—tell a soul.

Shen Zechuan loosened his collar, as if that would allow him to breathe.

Footsteps sounded outside the tent; Xiao Chiye was speaking to the guards. At the sound of his voice, Shen Zechuan stopped what he was doing. Xiao Chiye lifted the flap and entered.

“A-Ye.” Shen Zechuan didn’t turn, merely angling his head slightly as he called back to him.

Xiao Chiye pressed against him from behind.

Shen Zechuan melted under Xiao Chiye’s touch, his earlier dread evaporating. As their noses brushed, the temperature between them rose, so warm they were soon sweating. Shen Zechuan’s breath was hot, as if Xiao Chiye’s kisses scalded him. His expression resembled pain, but the corners of his eyes brimmed with pleasure as he surrendered and lost himself.

He was so fond of Xiao Chiye’s kisses.

Xiao Chiye took hold of both of Shen Zechuan’s hands and brought them behind his back to bind him. He extinguished the candle, and amid the spiraling wisps of white smoke, kissed along the nape of that neck where he buried his own despondency.

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye savored the sound in his mouth.

Without warning, the table was swept clean. Bent over it, Shen Zechuan wanted to reach for its edge to steady himself, but his hands were gripped so tightly he couldn’t move. Shen Zechuan tilted his head until he could see the side of Xiao Chiye’s face.

Kiss me, Shen Zechuan mouthed silently.

But Xiao Chiye did not. He remained where he was, mere inches away, and did not move.

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Chapter 164:
Sunrise

THERE WAS ONLY a little distance between them. Xiao Chiye's hawkish gaze slid from Shen Zechuan's brow to his lips as he said in a hoarse voice, "Oh, how I love you."

Shen Zechuan felt a shiver rise through him—it was the tremble of defeat. In the silence, he was like the captured night—even as it spread, it was still tangled around Xiao Chiye. The grip on his wrists was too tight, a hold so punishing that all that lay in his eyes was bared to Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye inched closer in a confrontation that held the promise of a kiss. He murmured, wicked, "I love you."

Shen Zechuan felt he was about to be driven mad by Xiao Chiye's words; this line undid him time and time again. He couldn't maintain the flimsiest veil of pretense; all that remained of Shen Zechuan was flayed open before Xiao Chiye. This was a side of himself Shen Zechuan could not bring himself to face. Yet everything to do with hypocrisy, deceit, and hostility was swept away in that tidal wave of desire.

He was panting.

To love was to hold nothing back.

Shen Zechuan's eyes brimmed with tears as Xiao Chiye crowded him against the table. That sensation of being filled surged through his body as he was pushed against the table's edge; he cried out softly as his body clung to Xiao Chiye's warmth without reservation.

Xiao Chiye kept both Shen Zechuan's wrists restrained, eyes fixed on where the curve of his waist led up to a spine like a crescent moon. Taking full advantage of his height, he drove up into Shen Zechuan's lustrous smoothness, thrusting with merciless force. It was as though he wanted to imprint the words *I love you* into Shen Zechuan's body, branding them into his bones.

The jade earring had been polished until it gleamed with a watery shine.

Just outside the tent, the boots of the patrol squad crunched against the dirt as they made their rounds; someone was chatting a short distance away, and the wind was sighing as it roamed the camp. But all of that belonged to another world; none of it belonged to Shen Zechuan. All he could hear was the groan of the table, bumped out of place beneath him, his own cry of climax around him, and Xiao Chiye's heartbeat above him.

Every single stroke echoed, *I love you*, *I love you*.

It was too much to bear; Shen Zechuan was unraveling, his voice and body freed from his control. He trembled, unable to stand firm on his feet, and as moans spilled from his lips, he shifted his restrained hands to extend a single finger, hooking it on a corner of Xiao Chiye's robe.

This tiny motion dissolved Xiao Chiye's heart into a puddle.

He dropped a kiss on Shen Zechuan's nape, as though holding him in his mouth. Every one of his motions was fierce, yet there was a startling gentleness in them. Shen Zechuan pressed back against Xiao Chiye, his waist stretched taut as a bowstring, while below, they were intimately joined.

Xiao Chiye released his wrists. Shen Zechuan groped for the edge of the table, but he seemed to have already given up, his strength exhausted amid the rocking jolts. Instead, he reached back to hold onto Xiao Chiye's arm.

A muffled sound escaped Xiao Chiye's throat as he leaned down to kiss Shen Zechuan's ear. He seemed to be taunting Shen Zechuan, and at the same time, showering him with praise. A few shining drops escaped the corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes; he closed them, his lashes damp with tears, and with all the self-control he could muster, he called out in a soft and trembling voice, "A-Ye."

Xiao Chiye buried his face in the side of Shen Zechuan's neck; he was overwhelmed, intoxicated, having been teased all day by this evil man who called his name as he pleased, every word an invitation. He took his

time, as if he had just woken from sleep and was slow to think, finally responding lightly, “Hm?”

“Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan turned his face toward Xiao Chiye, their breaths intertwining. In a show of near innocence, he called out, like a student only just learning to recite a poem, “Oh, how I, love you.”

Xiao Chiye lost his hold on Shen Zechuan’s hips; his hands trembled, and his throat was parched. He only pulled out with difficulty. He scooped his Lanzhou off the ground and strode the few steps to the edge of the cot, where he laid him on his back.

He grabbed Shen Zechuan’s hands to pull him closer, kissing him deeply, before driving in again. They had to be face-to-face to let their eyes take in all the best and worst of each other’s expressions. Xiao Chiye pushed Shen Zechuan’s damp hair aside. There was no space between them; even their imperfections fit perfectly together.

They tangled their limbs under the blanket of night, indulging to their hearts’ content, their sweat-slick bodies clinging endlessly amid the howling winds of the battlefield.

Before the break of dawn, Xiao Chiye was awake and carrying Shen Zechuan on his back, making their way through the frost-covered grasslands.

“It’s taking so long.” Shen Zechuan gathered his fur collar around him and pressed himself closer against Xiao Chiye’s back. Voice muffled, he said, “Start running.”

“You want to tire me out?” Xiao Chiye hitched him up on his back.

Shen Zechuan pulled the little braid from under Xiao Chiye’s collar and held it gently between his fingers. “*I’m* tired out.”

It was still very early, and the mountains to the east blocked out the edge of the horizon. The wind blew fierce, and the two of them were covered under the same cloak. They had walked out of First Sand Camp before daybreak. A small watchtower to the north had fallen into disuse, and it was there that Xiao Chiye was headed.

When they arrived, they huddled under the cloak atop the old watchtower, facing east as they waited for sunrise.

“I thought you’d come to propose marriage.” Xiao Chiye eased Shen Zechuan’s head onto his shoulder. “I’m getting old from all this waiting.”

Shen Zechuan was sensitive to the cold, and the wind was strong here. He uncurled one finger to lift the cloak higher and burrowed inside, wanting badly to bury all of himself into Xiao Chiye’s chest and seek refuge from the wind.

“I’ll come back when you’re eighty,” Shen Zechuan said. “By then, your father won’t be able to strike me.”

Xiao Chiye planted his chin on top of Shen Zechuan’s head, the cloak between them tickling his neck. “You’re the prefectural governor; you ought to possess the audacity to elope.” He thought a moment, then added, “The old man admires you.”

Did Shen Zechuan truly want a light cavalry of assassins merely to place them on guard duty? A squadron like this would require inhuman self-restraint—it was simply too useful. And how long would it take Shen Zechuan to put together such a squad? Even if he went to the great effort of establishing it, and succeeded, his success would bring them back to the first question: Could this squad stay stationed along the Chashi River? Could Shen Zechuan truly only want to deploy them for border defense? A unit like this was a blade that would kill without restraint. There was a darkness in it that mirrored the other side of Shen Zechuan.

Or would, if it wasn’t for Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye pulled the cloak down a little to reveal the nape of Shen Zechuan’s neck. “Here it comes.”

Eyes peeking over the cloak, Shen Zechuan looked eastward. Xiao Chiye reached over and tilted his chin up.

Thick clouds rolled along the horizon, the wind running rampant between the still-dark sky and earth. In the next instant, golden rays broke through the gaps, countless arrows of light piercing the layers of clouds. The sun, which seemed to bear a burden of immense weight, emerged from

those dark waves, churning the wisps into foam as it rose in all its majesty. The vast expanse of grasslands was illuminated in a heartbeat, sunlight igniting the thin pavement of frost into a carpet of diamonds. Withered grass seemed to roar to life, the wild call of the wind clear and distinct in their ears.

"Xiao Ce'an," Shen Zechuan said suddenly.

Xiao Chiye poked him on the cheek. Shen Zechuan grabbed his finger, revealing the red marks on his wrists. He seemed to be considering something.

Golden waves of brilliance rippled across the sky. As they watched, blue spread out like ink on a sheaf of rice paper, washing the entire canvas of the sky over their heads. The snowcapped peaks of the Hongyan Mountains rose against the summit of the clouds, where falcons screamed as they circled. Cast in dawn's golden hue, Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye turned their faces to the wind.

The next gust was so strong Shen Zechuan had the illusion he was about to be blown away. But Xiao Chiye was a rock bracing him at his back as he gradually moved to take Shen Zechuan's hands.

"You can do whatever you want," Xiao Chiye whispered into his ear. "As long as I'm here, you'll never fall."

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Chapter 165:
Frostfall

XIAO CHIYE GIFTED the horse Lu Yizhi had set aside to Shen Zechuan. While he still had some time to spare, he accompanied Shen Zechuan riding on the grasslands of the war zone. This horse was snow-white from nose to tail, with only a small shield of black on its chest. It was beautiful and intelligent, and even more lively than Snowcrest.

There were no battles to be fought today. Xiao Fangxu sat on the railing in his armor and watched Shen Zechuan canter around the paddock. He said to Zuo Qianqiu beside him, “This habit…”

“This habit?” Zuo Qianqiu squinted against the sunlight, deciphering a written prescription in his hand. “Finish your sentence, man.”

“…reminds me of A-Ye’s mother.” Xiao Fangxu raised a finger and traced Shen Zechuan’s trajectory twice. “Can’t ride straight.”

“He lived in Qudu all this time; he hasn’t had the practice. Just let A-Ye take him out riding a little more often.” Zuo Qianqiu lifted his head. “Have you found Yideng?”

“The venerable master’s elusive. His whereabouts are unpredictable; he’s not easy to track down.” Xiao Fangxu brushed the dust off the helmet in his hand. “Why?”

“We need to get Yideng to take a look at the kid,” Zuo Qianqiu said gravely. “I saw him in Qudu last year. He appeared frail then, but there was no major internal damage. Looking at him now, he’s in much worse shape.”

Xiao Fangxu sized up Shen Zechuan for a moment. “That serious?”

“You pay the price two-fold for consuming that medicine for as long as he did,” Zuo Qianqiu said. “He suffered three major tribulations one after the other in Qudu, and what happened to Qi Huilian was a heavy blow to him. The good thing is A-Ye and Ji Gang are both paying attention.”

Xiao Fangxu turned his gaze to Zuo Qianqiu. “Can he be healed?”

Frowning slightly, Zuo Qianqiu folded the prescription and tucked it into his lapels. “Tough to say. Let’s get a little strength back in him first.”

An extra bowl of fresh milk appeared on Shen Zechuan’s table at lunch. Having no knowledge of the distribution of supplies on the front lines, he merely assumed it was provided on Xiao Chiye’s instruction. But later, when Xiao Chiye entered, he brought with him yet another bowl of milk. After he drank it, Shen Zechuan’s stomach was full.

Xiao Chiye didn’t comment, believing the additional milk was from Zuo Qianqiu. On his way to thank his shifu, he bumped into Chen Yang coming in to collect the bowl.

“Is it shifu’s?” Xiao Chiye nimbly pulled on his outer robe. “I’ll take it back to him.”

Chen Yang set the bowl on the tray and lowered his voice: “It’s the prince’s.”

Xiao Chiye’s hands slowed.

“This morning, His Lordship told Wu Ziyu to give his own portion to Gongzi. He even instructed Border Camp to send milk-producing cows and sheep to Cizhou.” Chen Yang picked up the tray. “He made a special point of telling us not to talk about it or tell Gongzi.”

This old man.

Xiao Chiye nodded. “Give mine to my father tomorrow morning to make up for it.” After a moment’s hesitation, he called out to Chen Yang again just as he was ducking under the tent flap. “Wait. Never mind. I understand.”

Shen Zechuan couldn’t stay in the war zone for long. The weather in the Hongyan Mountains was changeable, and he had to return after only two days. On the day of his departure, a heavy fog descended, and the damp wind in the eastern mountain range blew so hard it sent the military banners snapping.

Xiao Chiye secured Shen Zechuan's coat and wrapped the fur collar around his neck. Seeing Xiao Chiye had no overcoat, Shen Zechuan asked quietly, "It's about to be winter here. Has the cavalry not been provided with winter attire?"

"My sister-in-law is working on it." Xiao Chiye propped himself against the carriage door to shield Shen Zechuan from the wind. "You should bring Ji Gang-shifu to the homeland for New Year's."

Shen Zechuan cast a glance over Xiao Chiye's shoulder and leaned in to whisper, "Can I?"

Xiao Chiye whispered back, "Hurry up and marry me to make things clear to my father. Otherwise, we'll look like we're having a secret affair."

Shen Zechuan had no idea Xiao Chiye had already laid his cards on the table. On hearing this, he nodded solemnly. "Your sister-in-law gave me a set of bracelets last time. I'll be sure to bring a gift in return in the new year."

Finding him adorable, Xiao Chiye laughed and stroked his cheek. "The armored cavalry will escort you back. Write me when you reach Cizhou. I'll return to Border Camp in another three or four days. It's closer."

"I'll write you a stack." Shen Zechuan slowed his speech, as if that would slow down time.

"I haven't made a new fan for you yet. I was so busy I forgot." Xiao Chiye brushed the jade earring with a fingertip. "I'll craft you a new one for the new year."

"I'm off, then," Shen Zechuan said.

Xiao Chiye ducked his head, leaning toward the carriage window, but before he could move in, Shen Zechuan cupped his cheeks and kissed him first. This kiss was brief, a touch lasting a fleeting instant. Xiao Chiye straightened up, lowering the curtain and taking a few steps back.

Fei Sheng stood off to the side, contemplating how to best ingratiate himself with Xiao Chiye. But before he could say a word, Xiao Chiye grabbed his neck and hauled him close.

“Wherever Lanzhou is”—Xiao Chiye fixed him with a cold, detached gaze—“you’d better be too.”

The grip around Fei Sheng’s neck was like an iron vise. He nodded breathlessly, and Xiao Chiye released him.

The wheels of the carriage began to turn. Xiao Chiye stood in place and watched it go. Inside, Shen Zechuan tugged the curtain open. The jagged peaks of the Hongyan Mountains behind Xiao Chiye were partially veiled by clouds, and the wind howled. In that moment, his silhouette seemed to overlap with that of the misty mountains.

Shen Zechuan gazed back at him.

Several dark shapes suddenly swooped down out of the wind. Flying at the head of the cast of falcons, Meng let loose a cry that reverberated through the camp. Tents of all sizes lifted their entrance flaps, while a long whistle sounded from the top of the watchtower.

When Xiao Fangxu stepped out of his tent, his battle steed was already saddled. He grasped the hilt of his blade for a moment before swinging atop his horse. He boomed, “Squad Three, guard the camp. Vanguards move first! Supply squad, pack up and retreat down to Second Sand Camp to protect the craftsmen!”

Xiao Chiye stepped back and put on his helmet, then turned to mount Snowcrest, who had just trotted over. Shen Zechuan could barely keep his eyes open in the piercing gale. He clung to the carriage door, squinting through the gusts of wind as Xiao Chiye receded further and further into the distance.

The clouds dispersed, scattering into millions of snowflakes that danced in the skies of Libei.

The first snow of winter had come to the battlefield.

It was predawn hours when Li Jianting opened her eyes. She sat up, and the palace maid in attendance stepped forward to pull back the heavy drapes. Fengquan, dressed in the official robes of a palace eunuch, nimbly knelt down to help the heir apparent put on her shoes.

After Mu Ru had assassinated Li Jianheng, Fengquan had found a scapegoat to die in his place. He had then hidden away in the Xue manor all this while, where he had become Li Jianting's personal eunuch. When Li Jianting came to live in the palace, Fengquan returned with her. Xue Xiuzhuo had not initially intended to use him again, but upon Li Jianting's insistence, he allowed Fengquan to change his name and remain by Li Jianting's side.

Li Jianting slept poorly, unaccustomed to the massive imperial bedchamber. All the palace maids serving the heir apparent knew Li Jianting permitted only Fengquan to serve in the hall at night. As they waited in the outer chamber, they occasionally heard the sounds of her cries, trapped in the throes of a nightmare.

Everyone in the bedchamber stepped softly as they helped Li Jianting dress in silence. When she was appropriately attired, Fengquan bowed and stepped forward, lifting his sleeve to affix the flower embellishment on her brow. Pastels and whites did not suit the heir apparent; she was best adorned in scarlet reds.

By sunrise, Li Jianting was waiting under the eaves for the various officials participating in the classics colloquium to arrive for their lectures. It was windy today, and Fengquan covered her with a cloak before standing to one side to shield her from the wind. The cold slowly turned his lips purple.

Li Jianting glanced at Fengquan. "It's already autumn. Didn't the Caps and Kerchiefs Service issue new coats?"

Fengquan was not permitted to look at Li Jianting directly. He turned slightly to her and answered, "They did, Your Highness."

She raised a finger to touch her own cloak, but she understood her every move was being watched. It would be inappropriate indeed for her to undress for a eunuch, and make fertile ground for gossip. She raised her eyes toward the upturned eaves shrouded in gloom. In the end, she didn't say a word more.

Perhaps there'd been some great delay on the way here because the officials were notably late to arrive today. Li Jianting stood until her legs

went numb. She looked toward Fengquan again. This time, she saw his ear peeking out in the dimness.

Fengquan thought Li Jianting was restless because she was cold. “This subject shall send someone over to take a look—”

“Your ear is pierced.” Li Jianting gazed fixedly at his earlobe.

Fengquan’s eyes shot toward Li Jianting. His fingers twitched; he instinctively wanted to cover his ear, but instead he lowered his gaze and nodded. Cautiously, he slowed his breathing. He found this tiny hole in his ear a nightmare, one that made him gag and amplified his panic every moment under Li Jianting’s silence.

At length, Li Jianting spotted a eunuch leading the officials toward the eaves. She inclined her head respectfully and waited for them. Head bowed, she said softly, “It looks nice.”

As he stepped forward to hold the curtain for the officials, Fengquan threw a swift glance at Li Jianting, but she didn’t look at him. It was as if she hadn’t spoken at all as she raised herself from her bow and followed her teachers inside.

The fists Fengquan had hidden under his sleeves were clammy with sweat. He retreated to one side of the door, and only after a long time did he take a stealthy peek inside. Through the gaps in the door curtain, he saw the rippling hem of Li Jianting’s skirt, and felt bewildered by her words.

Shen Zechuan’s return journey was a slow one: The roads were difficult to traverse in rain and snow, and Fei Sheng took utmost care for fear Shen Zechuan would fall ill along the way. He attended to everything personally. Even with the Libei Armored Cavalry escorting them, the Embroidered Uniform Guard still rode close beside the carriage, and Fei Sheng supervised the daily brewing of Shen Zechuan’s medicine himself.

The carriage came to a stop shortly after passing Border Camp. Mudslides had damaged the roads ahead, and repairs would delay the journey by a day. The troops would have to spend the night under the open sky.

Shen Zechuan stepped out of the carriage and brought Ding Tao along to walk his new horse nearby.

“Has Gongzi thought of a name yet?” Ding Tao asked, walking backward and lacing his fingers behind his head.

“Frostfall.” Shen Zechuan stroked the horse’s mane as he led it along.

Understanding at once, Ding Tao clenched his fist. “What a great name! It goes perfectly with Master’s Snowcrest.”

Shen Zechuan looked southward. Ding Tao turned to do the same and commented, “Dunzhou is eight or nine days’ ride that way.”

“So close.” Shen Zechuan hadn’t realized. “I don’t see any Libei relay stations around here.”

“There used to be some, but they were abandoned. Everyone has gone northeast to fight Biansha.”

Shen Zechuan’s breath came out as a white cloud in the cold air. He turned his gaze away and strolled a while longer with Ding Tao.

After dark, Fei Sheng led the men on overnight duty. He sat alongside the men from the Libei Armored Cavalry and warmed himself by the campfire, hunching his shoulders against the cold. “It’s seriously freezing up here. Libei’s not even entered winter, yet there’s already snow in the war zone. It can’t be easy on my brothers here. Have some more meat!”

One of the accompanying soldiers was a brigade commander. He didn’t stand on ceremony with Fei Sheng and sat around the fire with the rest of them, helping himself to the meat. “Snow in Libei always comes early. Usually, we’d be going home around this time, leaving just a few battalions to guard the frontier.”

“I don’t think the war will stop this year.” Fei Sheng accepted the flask of On Horseback and took a few mouthfuls. The burn made him exclaim with satisfaction. “If it wasn’t for you all holding the fort here, all the prefectures down south would suffer.”

“It can’t be helped.” The brigade commander’s face was ruddy with food and wine. “We’re the Libei Armored Cavalry.”

“Everyone says the Libei Armored Cavalry is the iron bastion of the north; all of you are true steel-boned warriors,” Fei Sheng said with feeling. “I always admired the armored cavalry, even back in Qudu. Han Cheng, that old dog, was jealous when he saw Libei had the emperor’s favor; he never stopped spouting bullshit. I couldn’t stand to listen; I told him off multiple times. Well now here I am in Libei, and it turns out I was right—all my brothers here are real men worthy of befriending! If any of you come to Cizhou on missions in the future, don’t worry about a thing. The minute you get off your horse, go right to the prefectural yamen and give them my name. I’ll make sure everyone here’s taken care of!”

Thrilled, the brigade commander patted Fei Sheng on the shoulder. “A worthy friend indeed!”

Everyone had a merry time chatting and feasting, warmed by the fire that burned all night to ward off wolves that might be lured in by the aroma of cooking meat. The Libei Armored Cavalry sent a patrol squad to make a few rounds in the vicinity. When they returned, one of them leaned over and said a few words in the brigade commander’s ear.

The brigade commander wiped his mouth, no trace left of his jovial expression. “Armor on!”

Fei Sheng was on his feet in an instant. The Embroidered Uniform Guard behind him were wide awake as well.

Shen Zechuan had yet to retire. He sat in the carriage, reading the latest letters from Cizhou by candlelight. Hearing footsteps, he asked without raising his head, “Is there someone nearby?”

Hand on the hilt of his blade, Fei Sheng stood at the window and spoke quickly. “Libei’s night patrol found traces of carriage tracks south of us. Master, we’re close to Border Camp. When the camp was attacked back in the sixth month, the catapults came from the south.”

Although Fei Sheng was always talking, his observation skills were unimpeachable, and his intelligence gathering was first-rate. While he didn’t possess Ding Tao’s eidetic memory, he retained every detail of documents he laid eyes on; he wouldn’t let any clue slip by him.

“Let the armored cavalry lead the way.” Shen Zechuan donned his cloak and disembarked. “Whoever it is, send someone to tail them. Don’t alert them to our presence.”

Fei Sheng grunted affirmation.

Shen Zechuan looked up at the starry canopy overhead, then turned toward the south. “The border of Dunzhou is just south of here. If we run into a Biansha supply squad, it’s very likely they took a detour north from Dunzhou.”

Fei Sheng crouched and studied the mud at his feet for a moment, then stood back up. “It snowed just a few days back. The roads here have fallen into disrepair; it’s not a smooth ride. If they’re transporting supplies, they’ll be heavy, enough to slow them down. They’ll likely have arranged for a large number of armed escorts.”

“Follow them.” Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. “The carriage can take up the rear. We’ll take the opportunity to visit Dunzhou.”

The Prince of Jianxing’s manor was in Dunzhou—Shen Wei’s former seat. Not daring to make wild guesses, Fei Sheng turned to give orders to the men, then extinguished the campfire, wiping out all traces of their presence before following the armored cavalry under the cover of the night.

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Chapter 166:
Liu’er

EARLY THE NEXT morning, Shen Zechuan stared at the mess of footprints on the path and asked Fei Sheng, “Was it a grain wagon?”

The wheel tracks were distinct in the mud, a clear sign that whatever passed had been carrying a heavy load.

“Whatever they’re carrying is heavier than grain.” Fei Sheng dropped to one knee and scrutinized the tracks. “I’d guess heavy weaponry. Master, they went to the trouble of sneaking into Libei from the south. Could they be planning another raid?”

“Third Sand Camp is now well-equipped and well-trained, with Guo Weili as their commander. And Border Camp isn’t far off. Without a large number of troops backing them up, a raid won’t do them much good.” Shen Zechuan turned toward the south. “Besides, if they came from Dunzhou, it’s possible they’re thinking of transporting supplies to the border along the Chashi River.”

But what supplies were there in Dunzhou?

Dunzhou’s granaries had long been scraped clean by the bandits. What was more, there were no garrison troops in Dunzhou to stop a small troop of Biansha Horsemen, if that’s what this was—so why bother with an unnecessary detour north?

Shen Zechuan thought carefully, sifting through everything he remembered about Dunzhou. He recalled the Biansha Horsemen had used catapults when they raided Border Camp in the sixth month. Taking a few steps along the wheel tracks, he said, “Military supplies, provisions—armaments.” He turned back to Fei Sheng. “After the fall of Zhongbo, the Ministry of War didn’t reclaim the armories of the six prefectures, intending to leave the equipment for the re-established garrison troops. But Qudu was negligent in their supervision, and eventually, these armories and their contents were forgotten.”

Fei Sheng stood, not bothering to brush at the mud on his knee. “There should’ve been plenty of siege engines among that equipment. If they fall into the hands of the Biansha Horsemen, Duanzhou will be in imminent danger.”

“Don’t let them out of your sight,” Shen Zechuan said.

The horses strained against their traces, trying to pull the wheels free of the mud.

Liu’er, wrapped up in a coat and wearing a brimmed biangu hat, was attempting to curl up against the cold to sleep. He didn’t succeed—the Biansha man with him, disguised as a traveling merchant, yanked him off the wagon by the ankle and whipped him awake. “Get up. Push!”

Liu’er yelped and scrambled to his feet, then limped over to push the wagon. He was getting on in age, and his hands shook. Someone stomped on his foot, and the pain nearly made him keel over. He was one of many bandits escorting this wagon. All their blades had been seized by the Biansha, and they now toiled under the cracks of horsewhips.

Following their defeat in Cizhou, the bandits of Mount Luo had returned home crestfallen. Rumors that Lei Jingzhe was a spy for the Imperial Army had spread like wildfire, and Mount Luo had fractured into over a dozen small strongholds that fought tooth and nail for control. Liu’er, Ding Niu, and the others had each formed their own bands, hoping to reclaim Lei Changming’s glory and become the next chief of Mount Luo.

But unexpectedly, another group of bandits, assisted by the Biansha Horsemen, had overwhelmed them in Duanzhou. Their main forces were slaughtered, and those that remained were recaptured as the Biansha Horsemen’s prisoners.

Ding Niu had refused to transport grain for the Biansha Horsemen and was killed at the end of the seventh month. Liu’er, who cherished his life, didn’t dare resist after that. He was now part of the Biansha troops’ specialized escort for grain transport.

Liu’er hunched over like a monkey, his long, drooping eyebrows quivering as he strained and pushed. He heaved with his fellows, not daring to slack off under his captor’s eyes. Even so, he didn’t escape a lashing. Liu’er grimaced in pain and huddled into himself, trying to hide behind others.

The wheels were lodged in the mud, and harsh panting filled the chilly night. These bandits, used to riding roughshod over others, couldn’t hold up under the repeated lashings; many were whipped until their skin was flayed open and their flesh tore. The wagon didn’t stop until hours before dawn. A few clusters of cavalrymen roamed the vicinity, hollering at the bandits to assemble and stand properly.

Liu’er’s coat had been shredded to ribbons by the whips, wads of cotton spilling out. He wrapped his arms around himself and waded through the marsh, which had a thin layer of ice on it. His robe was tattered, and his ragged trousers fluttered open to reveal a pair of legs like hemp stalks. The old man shivered in the cold.

The Biansha men sat down to eat, while the bandits were herded to stand to one side to shield them from the wind.

Liu’er curled his arms up within his sleeves. He was so hungry he was seeing stars. He licked his lips and squatted to take a rest.

“When will these shitty days come to an end?” one of his former subordinates muttered as he untied the cloth sack on his back and secured it around his waist. “Goddamnit, they’re gonna whip me to death! These motherfuckers really don’t hold back, beating us like livestock!”

He shifted on his feet. Liu’er was so hungry he could taste bile in his throat, yet he was still thinking of having a smoke. He fumbled in his sleeves for a long time before fishing out some tobacco dust, which he brought to his nose and sniffed hard. “They’re not educated; that’s why they treat people like cattle, no? Those tattoos on their bodies are all raptors and beasts. Hell, they even drink raw blood.”

The other man spat. “Had I known we’d end up this way, I would’ve given this up and joined the Imperial Army back in Cizhou. Damn it. At least it wouldn’t have benefited the Biansha.”

“Horseshit.” Liu’er stuffed the tobacco dust back up his sleeve and shot a furtive glance at the Biansha men through his fellow captives’ legs. “We’re bandits. What good could come of defecting to the Imperial Army? We’d still be traitors to somebody. They’re gonna use these siege engines we’re dragging over to fight Libei and Zhongbo. Who knows? When all’s said and done, maybe even the emperor in Qudu will be taken prisoner, and we’ll have to kneel to a Biansha king—”

Before Liu’er could say any more, his former subordinate yanked him up. Legs trembling, Liu’er stuck close to the group and stood ramrod straight, not even daring to move his eyes.

The Biansha man leading the group was called Jida. His head was clean-shaven, and his exposed, muscular bicep was tattooed with a scorpion. He wiped his mouth as he passed them, and the look in his eyes made Liu’er’s legs tremble harder; he was ready to piss his pants from fright.

But Jida didn’t give them any trouble tonight, merely leading his men to the front where the supply wagon carrying the ballista was parked. The Biansha were all keenly interested in these massive siege weapons.

The bandits remained resting where they were. All their dry rations had become soaked and musty. Liu’er still ate it all with his tobacco-stained teeth. The handful of them huddled together to keep warm. Fortunately it didn’t rain, or there would be more than a few freezing to death tonight. They sat on the ground, afraid to sleep.

But Liu’er was old. Gradually, it became harder for him to stay awake, and he dozed off, leaning against the wagon wheel.

“Shouldn’t they have brought more troops?” Fei Sheng squatted down once again and examined the footprints. “Most of these tracks belong to the bandits pushing the wagons. There aren’t that many Biansha Horsemen.”

With his helmet on, the brigade commander sitting atop his horse looked like a cast-iron statue. His voice came out deep and muffled as he pulled his horse’s reins: “They don’t want to draw any attention. They

probably have agents planted on Mount Luo. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare penetrate this far into Great Zhou with so few people." He turned to Shen Zechuan. "Governor, if you want to find out who they're working with, we have to capture and interrogate them before they enter Mount Luo's territory."

Their escort from the Libei Armored Cavalry wasn't large, but every man was a battlefield elite who'd fought the Hanma tribe alongside Xiao Fangxu. With the Embroidered Uniform Guard's assistance in battle and the dark, frosty night as cover, intercepting the Biansha party should pose no problem.

Shen Zechuan peered into the night. "Ding Tao, you stay here. Fei Sheng, go with the Libei Armored Cavalry."

Liu'er was awoken by the bitter cold. He rubbed both feet, feeling he might really freeze to death. He looked up at the Biansha Horsemen crowding around the ballista a little distance away. One man's strength was not sufficient to draw this crossbow. Usually, it would be situated at the rear of a battle formation or placed on the walls to defend cities. It was a formidable weapon in combat and a familiar sight in Libei's camps. The Biansha Horsemen had taken quite a few beatings at its hands.

Moving silently, Liu'er felt his way along the ground with his hands and used the wagon as a cover to make his way to its back. Then he crawled beneath it, ducking as low as possible to hide from view. When he made it to the rear of the procession, he dug his shoes into the mud and sprang forward, a sorry sight as he broke into a run.

Jida was wiping an arrow when he caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. He shouted in the Biansha tongue, "We've got a runner!"

The Biansha Horsemen mounted their horses in seconds, brandishing their whips as they bellowed and chased after him.

How on earth could Liu'er have expected Jida to be so sharp-eyed?! To think he still saw him from that distance and on such a dark night. Liu'er considered stopping and attempting to say he was merely taking a piss, but

when he looked back and saw those scimitars out of their scabbards, he knew he would die if he didn’t make good this escape.

Liu’er tightened his waist sash and kicked off his shoes in the mud. He fell, then climbed back to his feet. His vision was filled with the image of how Ding Niu had looked when he died.

The bandits had been able to call themselves kings on Mount Luo because of the Biansha Horsemen, and now, it was because of the Biansha Horsemen that they had become prisoners.

Liu’er muttered unintelligibly, pleading with all the deities and buddhas he knew. The sores that had formed on the old man’s soles made him grimace in pain. He was terrified of death, so afraid he wanted to drop to the ground right there and beg for mercy.

But the shouts and curses of the Biansha Horsemen made it clear they weren’t looking to recapture Liu’er. They had no lack of hands; what they lacked were poor fools they could make examples of. Liu’er shuddered as he fell into a mudhole.

The Biansha Horsemen surrounded him, and Liu’er burst into tears. He raised both hands in surrender and felt his bladder empty itself in the cold, muddy water. Warm urine soaked the legs of his trousers. Unable to understand the Biansha tongue, Liu’er merely kowtowed to the cavalry in terror.

“I’m sorry!” he wailed hysterically. “Don’t kill me!”

The Biansha Horsemen coughed, then spat thick globs of phlegm onto Liu’er’s face. They smashed their scabbards down on Liu’er’s back, sending him sprawling flat in the mudhole, mouth full of filthy water. Scimitars lifted both his long, drooping brows, and he swallowed the water in fear, laughter and sobs spilling hysterically from him as snot and tears soiled his face.

Jida stood in place and watched the cavalry amuse themselves with Liu’er. He kicked away the fabric cover of the ballista, then shouted for his men to drag Liu’er out so they could test the huge crossbow using the old man as a target.

The sound of the wheels turning scared Liu’er out of his wits. His legs dragged against the ground as they hauled him away; he slapped himself on the cheeks with both hands, cursing.

Why the hell did I run?!

Liu’er slapped himself until his cheeks were red and swollen. His captors hoisted him up and hung him from a tree branch a distance away. Bent over at the waist, Liu’er took in huge gasps of air as he watched the cavalry load the ballista with a bolt as thick as a child’s arm. Its arrowhead was unusual, with a rounded end forged from iron. When such a bolt descended from the sky, the impact would send brain matter splattering over the ground. The gears clicked as they turned. Once Jida pulled the trigger, Liu’er would watch that arrow soar up into the sky before hurtling down to impale him.

His mouth moved soundlessly. Then, with an unexpected burst of courage, he bared his yellow teeth and cursed, “Fuck your ancestors! *Fuck* all of your *ancestors*!”

Tears streamed down Liu’er’s face; he choked on his sobs, as if he might breathe his last at any second.

He’d always been a bandit, but he hadn’t been rootless. He’d had a son and daughters back at home, and his wonderful wife had been his childhood sweetheart who had followed him out of their village. Only when both husband and wife were past their prime had they been blessed with three children. Of them, two were daughters who’d had matches made for them in the third year of Xiande; they were to be married in spring that year. His son had wanted to be a soldier. Liu’er had spent ages buttering up Lei Changming before he finally managed to get his son entry into the Duanzhou Garrison Troops.

In the end, the entire garrison had perished in the Chashi Sinkhole that year, just before the Biansha Horsemen razed the city.

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Chapter 167: Guest

THE SKY WAS DARK, devoid of stars. Liu’er huffed white puffs of steam; he could no longer tell if he was dead or alive. He hung like a piece of cotton wadding in the wind, light as a feather.

Jida struggled to trigger the enormous crossbow. He shoved away the subordinates beside him to check on the weapon himself, barking a stream of questions in the Biansha tongue. But his subordinates were unfamiliar with such heavy weaponry; they called for a few bandits to examine the device. Jida unscrewed his waterskin to take a drink as he stood bare-chested in the chill night air and waited.

Fearing he would be subjected to the same treatment as Liu’er, his former subordinate lay prone on the ground, not daring to move a muscle. He stared at the muddy water in front of his face and noticed subtle tremors coursing through it. Thinking it was caused by his own rapid breathing, he raised both hands to cover his mouth and nose, but the tremors didn’t stop; if anything, they became even more pronounced.

Jida was the first to sense something amiss. He lowered the waterskin and listened intently. Then he threw the skin onto the ground and shouted, “The armored cavalry’s here!”

But it was too late. Under cover of darkness, the Libei Armored Cavalry had been creeping forward for half the night. Now, like a tiger, they pounced. The wagon beside Jida overturned with a loud crash. The startled horses whinnied as the wagon, weighing hundreds of catties, dragged them to the ground. The mounted crossbow sent up a wave of mud, and the wagons beside Liu’er’s former subordinate shifted along the slippery ground. The heavy supply wagons collided haphazardly, and chaos erupted as both men and horses were thrown off their feet.

Jida backed away from the mess, still calm as he shouted, “Mount your horses!”

The Libei Armored Cavalry’s battle steeds wore full body armor, and the sound of their hooves as they drew nearer was like thunder to the ear.

Encased in iron, the armored cavalry had no fear of the scimitars. They were like a dark wall that smashed through the formation of the Biansha supply squad. In iron armor furnished with long, thick spikes at the chest, their battle steeds were unstoppable in a head-on charge. The Biansha Horsemen couldn't outrun them; they were knocked to the ground and trampled to a bloody pulp before they could get back up.

The brigade commander gestured to Fei Sheng beside him. Fei Sheng, lightly armored on his own horse, circled into position and brought his saber level with the brigade commander's. In one coordinated move, they charged Jida, flanking him in a pincer attack. Jida mounted his horse, eyes fixed on the brigade commander as if he hadn't registered Fei Sheng's approach at all. He leaned forward, and the pony beneath him broke into a gallop, running like the wind toward the brigade commander. Their horses crossed paths in the blink of an eye. The brigade commander swung his long sword, intending to hack off Jida's head, but his swing missed the mark—Jida seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

In the next instant, a hammer slammed into the back of the brigade commander's head. His eyes and nose began to bleed immediately from the impact, and his ears rang. That nearly airtight iron armor could weather any blows from sharp weapons, but it had a fatal weakness: It could not withstand this kind of blunt impact.

The brigade commander dropped off the back of the horse and tumbled headlong to the ground. A sharp, shooting pain drilled through his skull; the buzz in his ears was deafening. He tried to crawl to his feet, but his body was trembling too violently. Blood trickled through the gap in his helmet. He couldn't hear his own voice, but he continued to move his lips: "Take, take off your helm—"

The iron hammer smashed into the back of the brigade commander's head once again. Blow after blow rained down, crushing his helmet until it was a lump of deformed metal. Blood spilled over the ground. The brigade commander went silent.

Jida squatted on the corpse's back and wiped the brigade commander's blood from his scorpion tattoo, then stuck his fingers in his mouth to lick them clean. Contained in his sinewy muscle was a shocking

amount of explosive strength. He lifted his iron hammer and locked eyes with Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng felt his hair stand on end. Catching his mood, the horse under him tossed its head in fear. Fei Sheng swallowed with difficulty; even after years of serving as an Embroidered Uniform Guard, he quailed at the expression in the other man's eyes.

This was no ordinary Biansha Horseman, yet this wasn't one of the Biansha's elite forces. They were unlike Hassen's troops who carried nimble pike daggers; instead, they were equipped with spiked iron hammers. This was a Biansha force that had never made an appearance on the Libei battlefields.

The thought was terrifying.

A strangled gasp escaped Fei Sheng. If an iron hammer like this were to be delivered to the front lines, the armored cavalry would become lambs at the slaughter. Any advantage they derived from their armor would be instantly negated.

"Retreat." Fei Sheng yanked on his reins and bellowed, "Retreat!"

They had to get out of here. Fei Sheng turned his mount and urged the horse into a desperate gallop. But even this didn't go as planned. This peculiar and treacherous squad was tailing him like a shadow; Jida had clearly fixed on him as a target, relentless in his pursuit. The two parties engaged in a cat-and-mouse chase in the dark. Fei Sheng had finally gotten a taste of the fabled Biansha Horsemen. The animal beneath him was a fine steed, but it couldn't widen the distance; Jida remained hot on his heels.

Jida's iron hammer swung at the back of Fei Sheng's head; Fei Sheng dodged it by the skin of his teeth. His horse was galloping out of control. Fei Sheng had nowhere near the Biansha Horsemen's skill as a rider and nearly slipped out of the saddle amid the jolts and bumps. The two parties were already hundreds of paces away from the supply squad when Fei Sheng realized he stood no chance of shaking his pursuers. But he couldn't retreat either—Jida had already caught up with him.

Fei Sheng did not wear the armor of the Libei Armored Cavalry. The iron hammer wasn't much threat to him; Jida switched back to his scimitar.

That crescent-moon blade locked against Fei Sheng's Xiuchun saber. Behind them, the squads had converged, fighting at close quarters. Blade against blade, the two men plunged headlong into the sparse forest.

Withered branches lashed Fei Sheng's face. He tugged on his blade, but it was ensnared with Jida's scimitar. Jida bared his teeth in a cruel smile as he said in Great Zhou's language with perfect pronunciation, "A warm welcome to our guests."

Fei Sheng was too preoccupied to retort. Jida leaned forward, yanking his scimitar back, and Fei Sheng's Xiuchun saber slipped from his hand and went flying. His enemy's horse rammed his from the side, knocking Fei Sheng from the saddle. He rolled to the ground and reached for the short blade at his waist, bringing it up before his face to parry the next blow.

Jida's scimitar had fallen along with the Xiuchun saber; he tightened his grip on the hammer. Relaxing his right arm, he swung the hammer in a loose arc up into Fei Sheng's face. The blade Fei Sheng held crumpled from the impact, and his whole forearm went numb. But he still reacted swiftly, rolling to the side and casting away the ruined blade. He was unarmed as he backed away from Jida.

Warily hunched over, Fei Sheng put more distance between them. He steadied his breathing, then made a condescending shooing noise at Jida, as if driving away an unwanted animal.

Fully enraged by it, Jida gripped his hammer. But as he swung it up, he felt a sudden weight on his back. Strangling Jida's burly neck, Ding Tao strained to call out, "Big Bear—"

Jida grabbed the youth's arm, intending to fling him over his shoulder and onto the ground. Yet before he could, a figure sprinted out from cover and shot toward him headfirst, slamming like a battering ram into Jida's ribs.

The Biansha soldier staggered under the impact, and Ding Tao seized the opportunity to break free. Li Xiong had been riding in the carriage these past few days, having the time of his life resting and eating. Now he flung out both arms and wrapped them around Jida's waist, widening his stance as

if he intended to lift Jida off the ground as one would pull up the trunk of a tree.

Jida's hammer swung out and slammed into Li Xiong's back. Li Xiong hung on tight but cried in pain, "Ow—Tao-zi!"

Rubbing his own numb arm, Ding Tao yelped, "Hit him with Ji-Style Boxing!"

Li Xiong loosened his grip and bellowed as he threw a punch at Jida's chest. The force knocked Jida back two full steps. Happy with this result, Li Xiong followed up with several more, every blow striking flesh. He recalled everything Ji Gang had taught him. Puffing out his chest, he looked back at Ding Tao. "He can't—"

Jida smashed him with a backhanded blow of the hammer, knocking him to the ground. No matter how sturdy this lad might be, the blow was more than he could withstand. Fortunately Li Xiong had reacted swiftly and thrown up his arms to shield his head—even so, the force of the blow knocked one of his teeth out. Tasting blood, he spat the tooth onto the ground, finally angry.

"Blockhead! Get up!" Ding Tao yelled anxiously.

Unable to get his feet under him in time, Li Xiong was forced to roll out of the way with all his strength. The hammer scraped his cheek and slammed into the ground. Mud splashed over Li Xiong's head, and he spat dirt from his mouth. Thinking quickly, Ding Tao leaned down and stirred the mud with his brush. He gave Li Xiong's shoulder a hard kick. "Go!"

Then, with a sudden flick of the brush, he splashed muddy water into Jida's eyes.

Jida hastily scrubbed it away—but Li Xiong was already moving. He pressed both hands into the mud and slid forward, attempting to slip between Jida's legs. But he was too bulky; he only made it halfway before he got stuck. Still, this boy had a one-track mind: He simply *had* to go this way. As he tried to brute force his way through, he knocked Jida over instead.

Ding Tao wanted to cheer, but Jida, having swiped his eyes clear, grabbed Ding Tao's ankle. Ding Tao had come to grief too many times from leaving one foot in reach and had long since learned to play it smart. The instant he felt Jida's grip, he lifted both arms to protect the back of his head and closed his eyes as he went limp. The moment he hit the mud, he shouted, "It doesn't hurt! I'm fine!"

Li Xiong climbed to his feet in the muck and lunged for his enemy's neck. Jida, already on guard against chokeholds, rammed his elbow into the bridge of Li Xiong's nose. Instantly, Li Xiong felt a burning pain. Jida's next blow sent Li Xiong flying into the mud, blood streaming from the youth's mouth and nose.

Jida rolled his shoulders, cracking his joints as if to indicate that the blows they'd exchanged were only a warmup—the real fight started now. His arms were far burlier than Li Xiong's. As Li Xiong sprawled in the mud, hand over his nose and mouth, he caught a blurry glimpse of the poisonous scorpion inked on Jida's arm.

Before Ding Tao could react, he felt himself lifted upside down by the ankle, brush and notebook slipping out of his lapels. Jida swung him up with all his might, sending the poisonous needles and secret weapons he carried tumbling out next, as well as a little oilpaper packet. Ding Tao scrambled with both hands to grab it, to no avail. "My candy!"

Blood rushing to his head, Ding Tao saw the paper-wrapped candies fall into an open hand. A gust swept past them, and a flutter of white sleeves descended on the muddy ground like a piece of drifting snow, arriving with the wind then swirling up into the air once again. The cold glint of Avalanche was like the crystal ripple of autumn waters as it arced toward Jida's chest, almost too fast to see.

Jida had nowhere to retreat. He cast Ding Tao aside, attempting to free a hand to grab hold of Avalanche's tip.

But even this was too slow; it took only an instant for the blade to reach his chest. Jida failed to grab hold of it, and Avalanche flicked up with a swish of white sleeve to slash toward Jida's throat. This time, Jida twisted to dodge, taking the blade in his shoulder.

A master!

Alarm bells went off in Jida's head.

But in the next moment, it dawned on him: Though this man had descended with the force of a thunderbolt, his first blow earlier had already exposed the hollow frailty of his constitution. Jida's mouth twisted in a sardonic smile as his hand chopped toward the side of Shen Zechuan's neck. As the white robe danced out of the way like a misty cloud, he closed in and balled his hands into fists to block Shen Zechuan's next attack before grabbing Avalanche's blade with a twist of his wrist.

With Avalanche trapped, Jida's other hand shot out to catch hold of Shen Zechuan's arm.

Jida knew this man would be a slippery target. He steadied his feet and seized his golden opportunity, turning and lowering his stance to throw Shen Zechuan over his shoulder and onto the ground.

Shen Zechuan nearly spat blood at the impact. He got back to his feet but couldn't break free of Jida's grasp. Sharp cracks rang out as his free hand shot out to trade two blows with Jida, who warded them off with sheer brute force.

Jida wasn't meticulous in his study of martial arts and didn't want to waste more effort on Shen Zechuan. As he parried the blows, he sensed Shen Zechuan had already abandoned Avalanche. The instant Shen Zechuan sprang up again, he swung his hammer.

The hammer smashed into a tree trunk. But he'd used too much force with this blow—he couldn't pull it back out.

Shen Zechuan was slightly shorter than his assailant. As he looked up, his pitch-black eyes locking onto Jida, Jida heard the *crack* of something snapping. Long before he identified the sound, he sensed the acute danger. He abandoned his hammer.

Before he could make another move, Shen Zechuan was striking out with unfathomable speed and power. This time he was much faster than before, as though he had been planning this since the beginning, luring Jida

into a false sense of security. Jida suddenly suspected Shen Zechuan wasn't injured at all—that his frailty before had been an act.

But Jida was out of chances to think. Hot blood spewed from his neck, spraying Shen Zechuan's face. Jida gurgled. Even in his last moment, all he felt was disbelief. He shifted his sluggish gaze and met a pair of impossibly deep eyes.

Shen Zechuan seemed to remember something. Lowering his expressive eyes slightly, he said to Jida in an amiable tone, "A warm welcome to our guests."

The moment the words were out, Jida toppled to the ground, half a broken paintbrush sticking out of his throat.

Ding Tao was badly shaken when Shen Zechuan dropped the packet of candy into his hand. He caught it in a daze. The oilpaper was red with blood, the scarlet having seeped all the way through.

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Chapter 168:
Scorpion

FEI SHENG GATHERED himself at once, staggering to his feet and moving to retrieve Avalanche for his master. Yet when he leaned over, he noticed something odd: As his gaze slid down that white sleeve, he realized Shen Zechuan's entire right hand was trembling.

Thick, sticky blood coated Shen Zechuan's fingertips. Jida had almost snapped off two of his fingers when they'd traded blows earlier; this trembling was beyond his control after such a fight. But he couldn't reveal the slightest hint of pain. The armored cavalry had just suffered heavy casualties, and Jida had splattered their brigade commander's brain matter right before their eyes. Shen Zechuan had to stabilize morale before it plummeted off a cliff.

"M-Master," Fei Sheng called out, apprehensive.

"Our men are assembling the bandits to try to reorganize the supply squad." Shen Zechuan always carried that blue handkerchief on him, but he couldn't bear to soil it with blood; this handkerchief was something he'd taken from Xiao Chiye. "Tell the Libei Armored Cavalry to take off their helmets. Don't panic. Now that the mounted crossbow is ours, our opponents are sitting ducks."

Both of Liu'er's hands were shaking. He'd been released and lowered from the tree, but the wind sent a chill through the damp patch between his legs. His former subordinate had taken advantage of the chaos to drag him along, pushing and shoving as he urged, "Run! Hurry!"

Liu'er looked over at the supply squad that had been thrown into confusion and asked feebly, "Who—who was it?"

"The Libei Armored Cavalry!" His former subordinate untied the cloth sack around his waist and threw it away, along with the chains that had bound him. "Let them fight. Let's go!" When Liu'er still failed to

move, he pinched him and cried anxiously, “Old Man Liu, what are you doing?!”

Liu’er’s feet scraped across the mud as he hunched over and held his ground. With a snarl, he said, “I’ll go, but not before stabbing these bastards to death!” He pushed his former subordinate away and staggered back toward the camp. “That son of a bitch aimed that crossbow at me. Those sons of bitches.” He stumbled and fell, then got up again, muttering, “I’m going to smash them to a pulp. Smash them all to a pulp!”

The men in Shen Zechuan’s retinue who’d arrived after him had rounded up the remaining bandits. Together, they pulled the overturned wagon back onto its wheels. The ballista was caked with mud; Liu’er hastily wiped it clean with a sleeve. Heaving with the crowd, he helped hoist the giant crossbow back upright. The moment it was steady, he put several long bolts in place and pulled the trigger.

Spotting this from a hundred paces away, Fei Sheng whistled to the Embroidered Uniform Guard still engaging the Biansha Horsemen. The Embroidered Uniform Guard fell away at once, retreating toward the remaining Libei Armored Cavalry. With no command from Jida, by the time the Biansha Horsemen in the clearing realized something was amiss, it was too late.

The moment the click of the trigger sounded, Liu’er felt an intense pain in both arms from the strain of the draw. He watched those long bolts arc into the sky before plunging down. Their impact slammed the Biansha Horsemen—who had nowhere to hide—right into the ground, impaled along with their horses. It was an almost instant death.

Liu’er stood on tiptoe and raised both arms to the sky. He laughed madly, as if this was the most gratifying moment of his life. Very quickly, the arrows were depleted, and the Biansha Horsemen, who had already been dealt a severe blow, could no longer resist. Their small numbers prevented them from getting into any sort of formation; a couple of rounds from the ballista was all it took to scatter them.

Liu’er’s former subordinate grabbed his collar and shouted over the din, “Old Man Liu, we should run now!”

Although they had been captives, they'd undeniably aided in the transportation of military supplies for Biansha and even guided them through Zhongbo. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Biansha Horsemen were sworn enemies divided by the chasm of blood debt. If the bandits who helped them were to fall into the Libei Armored Cavalry's hands, they would surely die.

Wasting no more time, Liu'er leapt off the wagon and limped along. "Go, go, go! Move!"

The moment they saw the Libei cavalry retreating, the bandits, as if by unspoken agreement, all turned to flee. But the cavalry squad that had brought up the rear was prepared: They drew their blades and surrounded the bandits so that they had no choice but to stay right where they were. Thrown into disarray, the bandits huddled together within the ring of horses' hooves. Even if they wanted to break out of the encirclement, they had no blades. Gradually, they squatted down amid the warning shouts and held their heads, not daring to make any more noise.

Fei Sheng and the other guards escorted Shen Zechuan back to his carriage. The moment the curtain swung shut, they heard the dull, muffled sound of coughing. Ding Tao gripped his candy, his eyes reddening. He tugged on Fei Sheng's sleeve in a panic and said, "M-my—young master…"

Fei Sheng covered Ding Tao's mouth with a hand and gestured to his subordinates to have the Embroidered Uniform Guard surround the carriage, blocking it off from both the armored cavalry and the bandits.

Shen Zechuan bent over in the seat, staring at his open palm, stained with the blood he had just coughed out. The index and middle fingers of his right hand were burning with pain, as if they were still being ripped apart. Earlier, he hadn't bent to retrieve Avalanche because he couldn't lift it. He hung his head, pressing his good hand to his forehead, and swallowed down the next wave of blood threatening to claw its way up his throat.

A long time passed before he spoke, his voice sounding particularly low and deep from the other side of the curtain. "Do a headcount of the bandits; have them continue pushing the wagon. Send a swift rider to

Border Camp and convey the news of this encounter to Ce’an. And send someone to Cizhou with a message for Yuanzhuo—tell him to reassure Zhou Gui until my return. It doesn’t matter what King Yi says. Unless he actually dispatches his troops, Cizhou must not make a move.”

“What about the Biansha captives?” Fei Sheng stepped closer to the curtain and asked carefully, “Are we keeping them?”

“Take their blades and hammers.” Shen Zechuan clenched his fist and slid his gaze across the darkness. “Then execute them on the spot.”

The sky cleared by morning.

Li Xiong crouched beside Jida’s body, looking as if he was trying to solve some puzzle. He poked at Jida’s arm, examining that poisonous scorpion at length.

Fei Sheng came over and gave Li Xiong a light kick to the boot. “Master gave orders to clear away the bodies. Why aren’t you letting them take it?”

Pulling Jida’s arm up, Li Xiong pointed angrily at the scorpion tattoo. “Why does he have a scorpion too? He can’t have a scorpion.”

Fei Sheng opened his mouth to make fun of this silly lad, but the words stirred something in his mind. He crouched down beside Li Xiong. “Why can’t he have a scorpion? Have you seen this before?”

Li Xiong pointed to the back of his own neck and answered, “My dage has one right here.”

A chill ran down Fei Sheng’s spine. Heart in his mouth and cold sweat trickling down his neck, he asked, “Lei Jingzhe? When did he have it tattooed? Why was there no word about it on Mount Luo?”

Li Xiong tugged at his hair, trying his best to think. “I don’t remember. He got it a long time ago—he already had it when he raised me! There are lots of scorpions in Gedal. When my dage took me there, he wanted me to get one too.”

Gedal!

Fei Sheng sprang up and raced toward the carriage.

Shen Zechuan was still resting. He had drained this morning's medicine like it was water. Ding Tao, keeping guard outside the carriage, heard Shen Zechuan cough several times. A medicinal smell wafted out, but no one dared lift the curtains to look inside.

Fei Sheng didn't dare either, but this was a matter of great importance. He placed a hand on the wooden frame and called out, soft, "Master. Master—"

Shen Zechuan slept lightly; in fact, he'd never truly drifted off. The real pain of the injuries on his back from being thrown was only taking hold now, putting him in so much agony he couldn't lie flat; he was merely leaning on his side against the pillow. He removed the jade earring and wiped it until it was completely clean. Only then did he open his eyes and make a sound of acknowledgment.

Even more cautious now, Fei Sheng reported what he had just heard.

Silence came from the interior of the carriage for a long interval before Fei Sheng heard the rustling sound of cloth, as if hands were sliding into sleeves. After another moment, a folding fan lifted the curtain. With the fan held in his left hand and earring gleaming in his right ear, the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes was sharper than ever.

The battle last night had been desperate; no one had paid much attention to the bodies. As they came upon Li Xiong now, standing beside the corpse of Jida, one thing they had overlooked became instantly apparent: In terms of physique, Jida was essentially what Li Xiong would grow up to become. They were both powerfully built, far stronger than the average man; their shoulders and arms were broad, and their muscles rippled with explosive power.

Shen Zechuan used his folding fan to roll Jida's arm over. "Is it exactly the same?"

Squatting again, Li Xiong nodded sullenly. "But Dage's scorpion is a little smaller."

"Strip the corpses," Shen Zechuan said to Fei Sheng. "All of them."

A short time later, the Biansha Horsemen who had perished lay stark naked across the ground. Fei Sheng examined them one by one. All of them had scorpion tattoos. The scorpions were all in different spots, places that were hard to discover—the back of the neck, middle of the stomach, side of the waist, or even behind the ear—and they were all on the upper body.

Turning to the remaining squad commander from the Libei Armored Cavalry, Shen Zechuan asked, “Have you seen scorpions like this on the battlefield in Libei?”

The commander studied the tattoos and solemnly shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like this. The Twelve Tribes do tattoo their bodies, but those are either tribal totems or symbols of meritorious service. No tribe takes the scorpion as their totem among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha.”

Shen Zechuan felt a creeping sense of foreboding.

This squad had been supplied with weapons that could deal a serious blow to the Libei Armored Cavalry. Should those hammers become prevalent on the battlefield, the standoff on the front lines would be broken, the generals of Libei caught off guard and put at a sudden disadvantage. And if they were really establishing a squad based on the physical standards Li Xiong exemplified, it wouldn’t matter even if they lost their battle steeds. If they breached Libei, not only Zhongbo but the whole empire would be in imminent danger.

“Scorpions are everywhere in Gedal. Dage called them our brothers; they are our friends!” As Li Xiong spoke, he looked at Shen Zechuan. “They have many small scorpions too. They’re very young and never come out to play.”

“Fei Sheng,” Shen Zechuan said. “Make a drawing of this scorpion and have it sent to Libei. Not just Libei, but Cizhou and Chazhou too. Tell Zhou Gui and Luo Mu to start inspecting the commoners in those territories immediately.” He paused, then said, making the words deliberate: “Especially the garrison troops.”

Lei Jingzhe was a native of the Zhou empire. In the years Zhongbo had been left to its own devices, anyone could move freely in and out as he

had. They could easily sneak the Scorpions into Zhongbo, or even further.

What struck Shen Zechuan at this moment was not merely the fact of the war, but the more insidious decay of government that had started during the reign of Yongyi. From the Zhongbo troops' defeat and the massacre of the cities to Xiao Jiming's poisoning, from Feng Yisheng's death in battle to Lu Guangbai's desertion. They had been focusing their attention on Qudu and the noble clans, but following the military provisions case, that explanation seemed increasingly inadequate.

Xue Xiuzhuo wished to revitalize the empire. Forcing Lu Guangbai to desert did him no good. Considering the tension building between Qudu and Libei at the time, why would Qudu have been so careless with Qidong's military provisions? Shen Zechuan sifted through his memories. The scene flashed through his mind, as if he was once again standing in the scorching heat of the Qudu summer.

Who had delivered the relay report to Wei Huaigu's desk—the one that had forced him to take the blame for the disaster of the moldy grain and sealed his fate?

Shen Zechuan was suddenly taken by a fit of coughing. He clutched the blue handkerchief and covered his mouth and nose. This onset was so violent it not only startled Ding Tao; even Fei Sheng's face turned pale.

"Master!" Fei Sheng reached for Shen Zechuan's arm to support him.

"Escort the military supplies back to Cizhou," Shen Zechuan said from behind the handkerchief. "There's no need for the armored cavalry to escort us any farther. Leave a few men with me. We'll head for Dunzhou today, in disguise."

There was a portrait of Bai Cha in Gedal, while the Prince of Jianxing's manor had been in Dunzhou. These two key locations were where it all began, tied to two people with an inextricable connection to Shen Zechuan, his blood kin.

"I want Lei Jingzhe as well." Shen Zechuan's expression was cold and detached as he bit out the last word: "Alive."

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Chapter 169:
Dunzhou

THE BIANSHA supply wagons, along with the bandits to push them, were placed under guard of the Libei Armored Cavalry for transport back to Cizhou. Shen Zechuan took some of the goods and a dozen or so Embroidered Uniform Guard members and disguised himself as a traveling merchant. Instead of heading south to Dunzhou directly, they took a detour to join the public road leading from Fanzhou to Dunzhou, as if they were traveling north, and entered the city through the west gate.

Liu'er, still wearing his ratty biangu hat, followed Fei Sheng with his back so hunched his butt was sticking out. The instant his eyes started roving, the Embroidered Uniform Guard would sandwich him in the middle of the group until he felt suffocated. He'd been Lei Jingzhe's carrier pigeon in the past, so he was familiar with the roads and well-informed as to goings on in Dunzhou. It would save a lot of trouble to have him lead the way. But this old man was crafty: In his initial attempt to escape, he had smeared his face until it was mottled and dark, and Fei Sheng had nearly missed him since he blended in with the group of bandits.

Shen Zechuan took his medicine diligently. After another five days on the road, his cough subsided, but he still couldn't put much pressure on the two fingers on his right hand. Unable even to pen his own letters, he relied on Ding Tao to write to Libei and Cizhou on his behalf.

"When we enter the city, we'll need to first go to a broker to register the goods." Liu'er tugged down the brim of his biangu hat to hide his face, then folded his arms beneath his sleeves and said with a tilt of his head, "Things are chaotic in Dunzhou right now. Only merchants who register with the broker can enter the city and stay in the inns. Caution is the watchword here, so anyone who doesn't know the unspoken rules is automatically suspicious."

Shen Zechuan's closed fan lay across his knee. He remained concealed from view within the carriage, the curtain revealing only his

vague silhouette. “Who owns this brokerage?”

“The Yan Clan of Hezhou.” Liu’er lowered his voice and shuffled closer to the carriage window. “Even when Lei Changming still had the Yan Clan behind him, this place was a mess. Everyone considered Lei Changming the one in charge, but it wasn’t like he was the Provincial Administration Commissioner or anything. Bandits like us don’t have all those clerks and runners in our employ like government officials do, so we don’t look too closely at anything happening among our underlings. But there were so many merchants coming and going. What if there were spies? So Young Master Yan suggested Lei Changming set up a brokerage here and hang up a sign with the name Tongming—*brightly lit*. The brothers who do business with the Mount Luo bandits know the right words to say when they enter the shop. The Yan Clan abandoned us later, but Lei Changming kept the shop running as a show of respect to Young Master Yan.”

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s lips twitched ever so slightly. “And with this, the Yan Clan has all the comings and goings in Dunzhou firmly in their grasp, as well as records of every business transaction Lei Changming ever made. I’m guessing this Young Master Yan was better acquainted with the accounts of the past several years than Lei Changming himself?”

“The young master’s a child prodigy.” Liu’er smacked his lips, looking out over the road. “Every deal Yan Heru does himself is profitable. He may be young, but he’s a mercenary man who loves money very, *very* much! There is no business he won’t dip his fingers into.”

Shen Zechuan recalled the incident regarding the lawful grandson of the Shao Clan. Lightly, he said, “I’ve heard Lei Changming saved Young Master Yan’s life. There must be some reason they fell out.”

Throughout their journey, Liu’er had spared no effort to ingratiate himself with Shen Zechuan, fearing Shen Zechuan would kill him off the instant he’d outlived his usefulness. He weighed the stakes and sold out Lei Changming without hesitation: “Lei Changming had an addiction—one that grew worse in recent years. The commoners in Dunzhou and Duanzhou were terrified. They didn’t dare keep their children here; those who could sent them far into the countryside. They were afraid we’d carry the children off and give them to Lei Changming. At first, Lei Changming kept all this

from the Yan Clan. But later, when he asked the brothels in Fanzhou for some young ones, the children the procuress delivered were recorded with the broker as rice and flour. The swap was uncovered in the Yan Clan's audits, and Young Master Yan flew into a terrible rage. Lei Changming swore up and down he would turn over a new leaf—but how could he quit such a vice? With Cai Yu in Chazhou fanning the flames, it didn't take long for Yan Heru to cut him off for good. Yan Heru stopped sending monthly funds to Mount Luo, and no more grain came our way."

At this point, Liu'er turned to face the carriage curtain. "This is why we were starving over on Mount Luo. Lei Jingzhe told Lei Changming to demand grain from Cizhou. Zhou Gui had no way to resist back then, so he caved time and time again. When the emperor passed away and the marquis rebelled, Lei Changming and Lei Jingzhe plotted together to rescue Han Jin and deliver him to Qudu in exchange for noble titles. No one was keeping watch over Zhongbo. If it really worked out and one of them was conferred with the title of prince or something, well, we could've become an official local army!"

Shen Zechuan tapped his fan with a fingertip. "Lei Jingzhe is a very devoted nephew indeed."

Lei Jingzhe was the mastermind behind Lei Changming's successes. How could he have let his uncle fall from power over such a small matter as some children from Fanzhou? It was because the Yan Clan cut Lei Changming's monthly funds that the bandit chief first turned his eyes on Cizhou. He'd marched his troops to the city in such an ostentatious display and ended up dead at Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan's hands as if he was merely target practice—he had obviously been set up to fail.

In all probability, Lei Jingzhe had long planned to usurp his position. Perhaps, as Liu'er said, he and Lei Changming might've gone to Han Cheng and asked for noble titles for both of them—but who was to say Han Cheng would acquiesce to such presumptuous demands? Throw Lei Changming's insatiable greed into the mix, and it was doubtful they'd have reached any kind of agreement. Thus Lei Jingzhe took Lei Changming, his own maternal uncle, out of the equation, ensuring he conveniently died amid the strife without dirtying his own hands.

This suggested two possibilities: Either Han Cheng was not himself a Scorpion, and in that case, perhaps the Scorpions were far less capable than Shen Zechuan feared. Or he was, but all the Scorpions were pawns who didn't know one another, and only had to stay in place and do what they ought to complete the mission.

Shen Zechuan had his own theories regarding both of these conjectures. He lost himself in thought and did not speak again.

It was long after dark when the carriage entered the city, but Tongming Brokerage, as its name suggested, was still brightly lit. Fei Sheng brought Liu'er with him to check in and saw carriages of all sizes and colors waiting outside. There were Longyou merchants that had come from Juexi, as well as human traffickers from Fanzhou. A hubbub of flicking abacus beads and raised voices filled this place, where every imaginable ware was on sale and there was still a flurry of activity despite the late hour.

Tongming Brokerage sat in the center of the bustle, large lanterns hung on either side of its door, extending down the street. Taverns and stores here operated all night, with people coming and going until dawn. There were plenty of ragged beggars, but all were on the receiving ends of barked orders sending them to and fro. Prostitutes, both tender girls and women past their prime, hung on the arms of wealthy men as they came and went, pulling them into inns in hopes of scoring a free bed for the night and some meager allowance for food. Amid the surging crowd, Fei Sheng spotted a few Biansha faces.

This place looked like it had never been touched by war. The stench of wine and meat gone sour permeated the air, jostling for prominence with the fragrance of perfumes and spices from Juexi and the Chashi River, the whole melding into an eyewatering fusion of scents. This street was like the silver river crossing the vault of heaven—here, the sole remaining lights of Zhongbo all converged, making the surroundings appear pitch-dark in comparison.

With so many people around, Fei Sheng didn't dare be too confident or careless. Armed with the tips Liu'er had given him, he stepped inside the

brokerage and looked around for someone to check them in. The wares they'd brought were beans and other miscellaneous grain from Huaizhou. The busy shop clerk went down the line one visitor at a time according to their order of arrival. He moved quickly, and the young assistant following him was even quicker in noting it all down.

When the shop clerk came before Shen Zechuan's carriage, he didn't presumptuously lift the curtain but bowed toward it earnestly. "My lords from the west are most discerning connoisseurs of trade. Since you've made your way to our Dunzhou, we'd never be poor hosts—just allow us to lay everything out clearly first. I'm sure my lord is fatigued from the journey; please treat this small delay as if it is merely entertainment to relieve your boredom."

Shen Zechuan was silent behind the curtain.

This shop clerk had seen his fair share of traveling merchants and had dealings with magnates and bandits alike; he knew some of these customers could be prickly indeed. He stood firm and said with a neutral expression, "Once my lord enters the city, whom you deal with is up to you; no one may interfere, for it's nobody else's business. All who come and go are guests, and all of us are friends. Dunzhou is an out-of-the-way place, so let's all look out for one another. If my lord requires mediation on any issue, feel free to send someone to this shop. No matter where you hail from, our staff will be standing by to assist the moment my lord so commands. However, I must make one rule clear to you: Any goods bought or sold in the city must be recorded in the shop, and each one must be a genuine product. By registering yourself with us, you may consider yourself verified by the Yan Clan. In Dunzhou, we share our prestige, our wealth, and our good names."

When the shop clerk was done speaking, he bowed once more to the carriage, then turned and gestured them ahead. "A courtyard has been specially prepared for you in the back. Please choose from the attendants as you please, and we have all kinds of fresh, seasonal fruits available for your enjoyment. As long as you remain in Dunzhou, ask for anything you'd like to eat or enjoy. Our Yan Clan will see to everything."

Fei Sheng was rendered speechless. The Xi Clan might be wealthy, but they were nowhere near this generous. This Yan Heru was truly a force to be reckoned with. Rumor had it that he treasured money as much as his own life, but that he also spent it like water. He was an ostentatious young man who loved nothing more than gold. He had invested all his capital into Dunzhou and won the hearts of the traveling merchants here. It was small wonder the Xi Clan's shops couldn't break into the eastern market.

The clerk wasted no more time on superfluous talk and announced, "The sixteenth courtyard of Tianji welcomes its distinguished guests!"

The carriage clattered over stone as it rolled forward, guided into the courtyard by a specially deployed attendant.

Face to the window in the darkness, Shen Zechuan heard a melody drifting from the upper floors of a tavern. Through the curtains, the dazzling kaleidoscope of colored lanterns blended into waves of shimmering, multihued water, so gorgeous he was captivated by the sight.

When Liu'er entered the courtyard, he clicked his tongue in wonder. He took his shoes off before stepping on the porch and held them to his chest as he followed Fei Sheng, casting glances all around. "Damn! How much silver went into this place?"

Fei Sheng peered down the covered walkway. "No less than a million, I'm sure."

Liu'er had never seen this much wealth in his life, and for that matter, neither had Fei Sheng. It was common knowledge that, during the reign of Xiande, the military budget allocated to Libei and Qidong was capped at two million total. The imperial court officials had reduced their own salaries, scrimping and saving to provide for the Libei Armored Cavalry and Qidong Garrison Troops. The imperial court was so impoverished the officials were tearing out their hair. Yet here on the fringes of the empire, Yan Heru was spending hundreds of thousands of taels with a wave of his hand, merely for the sake of entertaining his guests.

The journey had been a difficult one. Afraid to let Shen Zechuan tax himself a moment longer, Fei Sheng watched him as he drank his medicine,

then called for a subordinate to prepare water and make the bed. He didn’t dare urge Shen Zechuan to take a rest himself; he quietly instructed Ding Tao to suggest it.

Fei Sheng called no attendants from the Yan Clan to serve in the courtyard, but set layer upon layer of the Embroidered Uniform Guard around it. He placed himself in the innermost circle, standing guard beneath the eaves of Shen Zechuan’s room. Nor were guards on duty limited to the ground: More were stationed along the ridges of the upturned eaves. After sleeping his fill in the carriage during the day, Ding Tao now sat among them, writing and drawing with Li Xiong. The warning Xiao Chiye had given Fei Sheng before they set off echoed in his ears. If Shen Zechuan so much as coughed in the night, Fei Sheng’s heart would leap into his mouth.

Shen Zechuan hadn’t been in Dunzhou since he was a child, yet for some reason, his nightmares were especially ferocious that night. The Chashi Sinkhole had disappeared, and the Prince of Jianxing’s manor had appeared in its place.

His old deaf and mute nanny sat under those dark, gloomy eaves, while Shen Zechuan stood alone in the dimly lit room, his throat dry. But the table was so very high; he stood on tiptoe to reach for the teacup and ended up tipping it onto the ground. Porcelain shattered at his feet and exploded in all directions, cutting his finger.

In the dream, Shen Zechuan began to sob.

He felt inexplicably upset, as if he had broken something incredibly precious. But no matter how he cried, the woman merely focused on her embroidery with her back to him. Again and again she raised her hand before bringing the needle down, her shadow stretching across the floor toward Shen Zechuan’s feet like an eerie, long-limbed monster. She repeated the motion over and over, everything around her shrouded in awful silence.

Shen Zechuan’s finger burned with a searing pain. He anxiously clutched his robes and wrapped the hem of his sleeve around the cut. Blood bloomed through the fabric, like a camellia broken apart after falling onto the snow—fresh, vivid red.

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Chapter 170:
Monster

THE TWO INJURED FINGERS on Shen Zechuan's right hand trembled violently, the blaze of pain jolting him awake. Wearily, he raised his right arm and tried to spread his fingers, only to realize his index and middle fingers were so stiff he couldn't move them. The window paper glowed with the indistinct light of day—to think he had slept so long.

Shen Zechuan lowered his arm and let the sweat trickle down his temples. After a moment, he rolled over and got up, his injured fingers curled as he put on his clothes.

At the first sound of movement, Fei Sheng turned and beckoned to the subordinate holding the medicine. A guard opened the door, and Fei Sheng lifted the hem of his robe and strode inside, where Shen Zechuan was washing up at the copper basin.

"Master," Fei Sheng said softly as he stepped closer, "we called for a physician early this morning. He's waiting outside now. Shall we summon him in to take a look?"

Shen Zechuan dipped his handkerchief back into the basin. In a rare show of compliance, he said, "Go ahead."

Delighted, Fei Sheng called at once for the physician. As they waited, he said to Shen Zechuan, "We released the bandits last night. Thanks to Liu'er's connections, the news came in quickly. Master, Lei Jingzhe is right here in the city!"

Shen Zechuan moved to stand by the door and looked back pensively at Fei Sheng.

If Lei Jingzhe was here now, it suggested he knew the route of Biansha's supply convoy by heart, as well as precisely how long the route took, even accounting for potential delays. Only a day or two after the squad failed to arrive at its destination, Lei Jingzhe had set out for

Dunzhou. He likely wanted to get to the bottom of who had robbed the Scorpions.

"The supply wagons we confiscated are being escorted to Cizhou by the Libei Armored Cavalry," Fei Sheng commented. "News can't have spread that fast. In any case, they've likely entered Cizhou already, so whether or not Lei Jingzhe learns what happened, the cargo and men are ours now." Fei Sheng stepped aside and watched as Shen Zechuan drank his medicine. "But it'll be difficult to catch Lei Jingzhe alive in the city. Master, we've heard there are still four hundred Scorpions watching over the other bandits they took captive; we should consider those four hundred Lei Jingzhe's own soldiers. We have too few men."

Shen Zechuan grimaced faintly at the bitterness of the medicine. "Lei Jingzhe has yet to put Mount Luo and Duanzhou in order. He lacks manpower. Most likely, he smuggled those armaments out of Zhongbo to ingratiate himself with the Biansha tribes. The four hundred Scorpions in the city of Dunzhou might not necessarily listen to his orders. Besides, we came to Dunzhou to do business, not to rob people. We can take our time." He handed the empty bowl back to Fei Sheng. "Things have been quiet in Cizhou lately. I have all the time in the world to play with him."

When Fei Sheng took the bowl, he spied Shen Zechuan's hand dangling from within his sleeve. The color drained from his face, and he dropped to his knees. "Master, your hand is broken! We were in such a rush during our journey—how could I be so blind? To think I never—"

"Time was of the essence. It's not like we would've found a decent physician on the way." Seeing Fei Sheng's panic, Shen Zechuan reassured him, "It's just two fingers, and they're broken, not severed. I'll let the physician set them with steel braces and have them bandaged. They'll be fine after half a year of healing."

Shen Zechuan responded nonchalantly, but listening to him downplay his injuries filled Fei Sheng with trepidation. Whether out of genuine sentiment or feigned sincerity, Fei Sheng's eyes reddened as he placed his palms flat on the floor and said in a trembling voice, "When the master is wounded, his servant deserves death for letting it happen. What good is a guard at his master's side if he allows his master to be injured?" He raised a

hand and slapped himself several times on the cheek. “It’s because we’re so useless that Master had to come to our rescue personally! Master, I beseech you to bestow our deserved punishments!”

As the leader of the other Embroidered Uniform Guard members, by kneeling here and slapping himself without the slightest hesitation, Fei Sheng was effectively slapping the faces of those men outside. He lowered himself to make clear to everyone here and in the courtyard that this incident should be taken as a wake-up call. Such an oversight could not be made again—Shen Zechuan must never get hurt. From the moment they had arrived in Zhongbo after being forsaken by Han Cheng and rejected by Xiao Chiye, Shen Zechuan had been their only remaining master.

Qiao Tianya had his own knack for managing his subordinates. He was more well-liked than Fei Sheng among the men, but he was too uninhibited. At times, he seemed to treat Shen Zechuan more as a friend than a master. Fei Sheng had gained much from Shen Zechuan deploying Qiao Tianya to Yao Wenyu’s side.

Could Yao Wenyu’s body heal quickly? If not, Qiao Tianya might stay with Yao Wenyu for several years. Shen Zechuan had given his vacated position to Fei Sheng, which to Fei Sheng’s mind was a hint: He had to accomplish in this position what Qiao Tianya could not. He had to make it clear to the current Embroidered Uniform Guard that it was only out of respect for Ji Gang that Shen Zechuan did not pursue their dereliction of duty—and that they must never, ever repeat the mistake.

Fei Sheng wouldn’t twitch a finger without the nod from Shen Zechuan. Likewise, so long as Shen Zechuan gave the command, Fei Sheng would see it through to the very end, good or ill. He had a far greater awareness of his place than Qiao Tianya—Fei Sheng was Shen Zechuan’s guard, not his friend. Unlike his predecessor, Fei Sheng would never privately report Shen Zechuan’s injury to Xiao Chiye.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard followed suit and knelt, their faces burning with sympathetic pain as they listened to the sharp sounds of Fei Sheng’s slaps. Fei Sheng smacked himself until his cheeks turned red. He had raised his hand for yet another slap when a folding fan intercepted the blow.

“There can be no progress without pain. As long as you learn from this mistake, it’s all right.” Shen Zechuan withdrew the fan he still held in his left hand. “Those in the courtyard are good men. Mistakes will be punished in due time; I’ll make my own arrangements when we return to Cizhou. You may rise.”

That Shen Zechuan did not let Fei Sheng continue to abuse himself meant he had no intention of humiliating them. This man accorded scholars their due respect, and he didn’t treat the Embroidered Uniform Guard shabbily either. Their monthly salaries were issued in a timely fashion and paid in ready silver according to Qudu’s standard, and they resided in spacious, well-lit rooms. What was more, they had Ji Gang close by to give them martial arts pointers at any time. At first, they had assumed Shen Zechuan would be a capricious man and a difficult master, but over time, they realized he in fact had set preferences, and meted out both reward and punishment fairly. His commands were decisive and straightforward, and he never vented his anger on his subordinates.

Fei Sheng wiped his tears and kowtowed a few more times before rising from the floor and taking his position beside him. Ding Tao, staring blankly at the unfolding scene, felt a terrible wave of guilt. The physician happened to arrive a moment later, so Fei Sheng lifted the curtains and invited the man in.

Both of Shen Zechuan’s fingers had indeed been broken, but it was thankfully only a fracture. As he expected, the physician set them and secured his hand with steel braces. With half a year of recuperation, they would be more or less healed.

“My lord mustn’t wield a blade or draw a bow while they heal.” The physician was an old man. As the fee they’d paid him was generous, he made a special point of giving further instruction when he got up. “The injury went untreated for quite a few days. It’s fortunate you didn’t delay it any longer. Otherwise, I couldn’t have set them back into place even with the braces. My lord seems to be in poor health, and the weather is unpredictable in the eighth month. You must take more care with your meals and attire. Don’t fall ill again.”

The old physician had twitched aside his sleeves to pack his medical case when he remembered one more point. “Does my lord have trouble sleeping? I see you’ve come to do business, but taxing your brain wears on both your mind and body. No one can remain healthy if they’re haunted by nightmares for a long period of time. I’ll get you a brocade pouch and fill it with some calming incense. You can put it under your pillow at night to see if it helps.”

Fei Sheng bent to take up the physician’s case and see him out, leaving Shen Zechuan with Ding Tao nearby.

In the brief, peaceful silence that followed, Shen Zechuan studied his right hand. His broken fingers were bound together so securely he couldn’t even stretch them, much less think about grasping his blade. It was a true stroke of luck that they were still in one piece.

But why would he dream of the Prince of Jianxing’s manor?

Last night’s dream fluttered before his mind’s eye again like a jaundiced, worn-out rag. Only the nanny’s back was visible because Shen Zechuan no longer remembered how she looked. He had cried so sadly for that cup of water—but had it really been for that?

Shen Zechuan let his arm fall and slowly leaned back. He ran his gaze along the half-lowered bamboo blinds to the ground outside, where he could see the dark shadows of the trees. He sifted through his memory of the dream, attempting to lay every scene out for deeper scrutiny.

The deaf and mute nanny sat under the eaves.

The courtyard was tiny, and the direction the house faced was not ideal; once dusk fell, the interior dimmed quickly. Shen Zechuan was still small, so small he didn’t have to bend to peer under the curtains into the inner chamber. He wanted to drink that cup of water so much—his throat was on fire. But he couldn’t reach it. He stood on tiptoe.

Shen Zechuan tilted his head back slightly.

He stood on tiptoe—this wasn’t the first time this had happened. He knew the teacup might fall to the ground, so while he reached up, he glanced into the inner chamber. But the room was too dark. The windows

were shut, and that half-lowered beaded curtain was like a dead thing. It remained still and unmoving, a veil of white in the darkness.

Shen Zechuan frowned and pushed harder, as if in a trance.

Why did he have to look in?

The young Shen Zechuan stood on tiptoe and peered over the edge of the table to look at that tangle of darkness. He blinked several times, gaze steady, but couldn't help stretching his fingers out to touch the rim of the teacup. Someone stirred in the darkness. Attention diverted, Shen Zechuan accidentally brushed the teacup aside and off the table. The sound of the cup shattering was so clear, as if it had smashed right beside his ear. Startled, the figure in the inner chamber turned around. The eerie shadow of the nanny who sewed and sewed soundlessly grabbed Shen Zechuan by the foot, and it was at this moment that Shen Zechuan saw a terror-stricken face in the dark.

Shen Zechuan sucked in a breath. He came back to his senses and found he had unconsciously clenched his right hand into a fist. Agony throbbed through his broken fingers. The autumn weather today was hot, but Shen Zechuan's back was drenched in cold sweat.

He had seen Shen Wei.

His father's face had been contorted with a terror so jarring Shen Zechuan jolted to his feet. Irritated, he relaxed his right hand and turned toward the shadows of the trees under the eaves. He couldn't recall what exactly Shen Wei had been doing.

Why had he been so panic-stricken?

It had been too dark in that inner chamber; Shen Zechuan hadn't been able to see a thing. Shen Wei's face had seemed to be trapped in a thick, black mass of shadows. But no matter how he cast his mind back, he made no progress. He felt as if he was stuck in time, frozen on the sight of Shen Wei's face.

Fucking hell.

Usually, Shen Zechuan kept his volatility locked firmly under an icy demeanor, but not this time. The revulsion in his expression was an

indicator that he was already on the brink of losing control. He closed his eyes against the sunlight, feeling like a trapped beast, sweat beading at his temples.

In the dream, his cut finger was bleeding, staining his robe. Once again, pale white juxtaposed with vivid red. The beaded curtain hung limp, then swung violently as it reared back to life. The scene flashed by. That strange shadow grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan; his finger was seeping red. The old woman's hands moved over her never-ending embroidery as her arms stretched longer and longer until the shadow mutated into a scorpion brandishing its tail.

Crack!

Shen Zechuan snapped back to alertness.

Ding Tao's legs gave out, and he fell backward, staring up wide-eyed at Shen Zechuan, as though at a stranger. All the hair on his body seemed to stand on end. His candy tumbled onto the ground, where it bumped into Shen Zechuan's broken fan.

Leaning over, Shen Zechuan retrieved the candy and held it out to Ding Tao, but Ding Tao didn't reach for it. Instead, he shrank back in fear, fleeing from Shen Zechuan's shadow.

Shen Zechuan's throat bobbed. He felt like a demonic creature flayed of its skin, thoroughly exposed under the stinging sunlight. He looked up, the pale column of his neck revealing his fragility, and as the wind huffed at his sleeves, he laughed into the endless stillness and gently tossed the candy away.

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Chapter 171:
Tattoo

DING TAO WAS petrified. When his eyes met Shen Zechuan's, he was sure for a moment he would die like Jida had. The look in Shen Zechuan's eyes when he killed the Scorpion commander had been just the same as the one that locked on him now. Ding Tao wanted nothing more than to run—when Shen Zechuan handed him the candy, he lost the courage to even raise his hand.

It was silent out on the walkway. Shen Zechuan had retreated further into the room. The harsh sunlight scorched Ding Tao's skin. He had yet to recover his wits. The feeling was indescribable, but one thing was certain—that was not the young master he knew.

Ding Tao wiped his eyes with both hands. He wanted to pick up the candy, but while he sat dazed, it had melted from the heat, and the delicate sweetness of osmanthus had attracted a swarm of ants. Ding Tao remained kneeling where he was. Though he didn't know why, tears began to course down his cheeks.

After the interruption, Shen Zechuan could no longer piece his memories into a coherent whole. It had been too dark in the dream; he simply couldn't remember any more details. He stood behind the bamboo blinds and heard Ding Tao sobbing outside.

Shen Zechuan told himself: He must not dwell too deeply on this dream.

He had to sieve truth from falsehood as soon as possible—were the contents of this dream something he had genuinely seen? Or were they a figment of his imagination? For six years, he had been tormented by nightmares. He knew best that such dreams were an uneasy mixture of reality and fiction. When he used to dream about the Chashi Sinkhole, the sight that greeted him in that pit would change according to his state of mind.

After his injury in Chazhou, Shen Zechuan had dreamed he was lying in the sinkhole himself. It had been the prelude to his mistrust toward his own body and the realization that he had begun to fear death. Frequent nightmares could distort memories. In truth, Shen Zechuan was no longer certain of the words Ji Mu had said to him before he died.

Dangerous, Shen Zechuan thought, self-mocking.

It was only Shen Wei.

Liu'er's network was handier than expected. His informants were hidden all over the city, in every street and alleyway. As long as they were paid, they would become Fei Sheng's eyes and ears; he could snoop into every nook and cranny of Dunzhou without setting foot outside. And what they learned of Lei Jingzhe's movements was intriguing to say the least.

"Lei Jingzhe has been searching for three days in a row now. He's checking through all the goods entering and exiting the city," Fei Sheng said behind Shen Zechuan, his voice low. "Master, could he know we're here?"

Today, Shen Zechuan was wearing a black sun hat with a wide brim and a hanging sheer veil, a style common among scholars in Qudu. "If he was looking for us, he would be checking the carriages of the merchants coming and going, rather than the goods themselves."

These military supplies must have been important to Lei Jingzhe, or he wouldn't have rushed over to Dunzhou to check on them himself. Shen Zechuan's best guess was that Lei Jingzhe wanted to exchange the grain and weapons for something of equivalent value from the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Yet instead of searching to the west, toward Cizhou, he was wandering around the city of Dunzhou.

Shen Zechuan leaned on the railing of the tavern's mezzanine and surveyed the establishment from top to bottom through the sheer veil, taking his time to organize his thoughts. "If he's checking the goods, he thinks those supply wagons will return to Dunzhou."

He tapped his fingertips on the rail. *How strange.*

How could Lei Jingzhe be so sure the supply wagons would return to Dunzhou? The powers in Zhongbo with the ability to capture a convoy of this size were few and far between. Cizhou should be one of the prime suspects. Shen Zechuan had been prepared for the possibility of answering Lei Jingzhe's challenge openly, but incredibly, Lei Jingzhe hadn't suspected him at all.

"Master, even if Lei Jingzhe thought someone else snatched the supplies, who would send them back to Dunzhou?" Fei Sheng could make neither heads nor tails of it. "There are more Scorpions stationed here. Bringing the supplies back would be walking right into a trap."

"You're right." Shen Zechuan, who had been having difficulty sleeping in recent days, wearily massaged his brow. "Who on earth would steal supplies then send them back?"

It made no sense at all.

"The informants we've planted in Dunzhou have all been useless because it's too chaotic here." Fei Sheng plucked up his courage and asked, "Could it be that a bandit who's unwilling to defect to the Biansha is scheming against Lei Jingzhe?"

Shen Zechuan thought it over, then shook his head. "Since the Mount Luo bandits fractured, there hasn't been a leader who could unite them. Ding Niu and Liu'er were both captured because they never thought of joining forces to oppose Lei Jingzhe. With their numbers, they could pull off small robberies, but they would never have the guts to lay their hands on something of this size."

Military armaments were somewhat unique—they couldn't be divided up and hidden like grain. Given that these wagons required hundreds of bandits to push them, it was obvious how heavy they were; no minor bandits could have absconded with them. Shen Zechuan himself was only able to move them because he had let the bandits live and had the Libei Armored Cavalry tagging along to hold them in check. Otherwise, he wouldn't have easily gotten his hands on such a prize.

The whole situation was so bizarre it verged on ridiculous.

Yet Fei Sheng didn’t dare laugh. He wracked his brains, wishing Mister Chengfeng or Yuanzhuo were present—then he wouldn’t have needed to speak up. But with no one else beside Shen Zechuan, Fei Sheng would look like a blockhead if he merely stood without moving. He thought hard for a moment and offered, “Could it be—”

A commotion downstairs cut him off. Shen Zechuan lifted the sheer veil and squinted into the main hall. From their fifth-floor perch, they had a fine view of what transpired below.

This particular tavern belonged to the Yan Clan. Shen Zechuan had gotten a tip Lei Jingzhe would come here tonight to entertain someone, though the identity of this person was unknown. Their informants hadn’t been able to tell them, but Shen Zechuan had a good guess who it would be.

“The Scorpions.” Fei Sheng lowered his voice. “Lei Jingzhe brought the Scorpions.”

Shen Zechuan looked down at Lei Jingzhe, who had apparently recovered from his injuries. His hair was cropped short; one could hardly distinguish him from the Biansha Scorpions crowding around him. At this distance, Shen Zechuan couldn’t get a clear look at the tattoo on Lei Jingzhe’s neck.

It seemed Lei Jingzhe had urgent matters to attend to. He strode across the hall and hurried up the stairs.

“If he’s just here for a feast,” Fei Sheng said, furrowing his brow, “then that’s quite the procession he’s brought along with him, isn’t it?”

There were plenty of merchants in the building, but none of them dared stand in Lei Jingzhe’s way. He had indeed brought a large group—at least thirty men. A few of them followed him up the stairs while the rest took their seats in the main hall. Scattered throughout the hall in their various disguises, the Embroidered Uniform Guard kept their eyes on Lei Jingzhe while they drank, made merry, and even brushed past him.

Shen Zechuan took a sip of his tea, watching as Lei Jingzhe climbed the stairs to the opposite side of the fifth-floor mezzanine where he was sitting. “When you get back, give Liu’er some money. Reward him for pinpointing the location.”

Fei Sheng nodded.

The party on the opposite side of the floor lowered the bamboo blinds to deter prying eyes. The handful of men Lei Jingzhe brought upstairs stood guard outside. Fei Sheng, who had extraordinary eyesight, studied the men's bodies for scorpion tattoos by the light of the lanterns.

Almost an hour later, all the lanterns in the building had been lit. The party behind the blinds called for food to be served, and waiters wove in and out of the partitioned area. Fei Sheng shifted his position several times, but the screen on the other side had been too cleverly placed; he couldn't find a crack to look through.

Lei Jingzhe's feast went on for a long time, from the early evening till late at night. Even then, they still hadn't called it a day. Shen Zechuan had finished an entire pot of tea and was leaning back sleepily in his chair. Another two hours passed, yet the vibrant atmosphere inside, rather than evaporating, seemed to only become more raucous.

"Typical of a Yan Clan establishment," Fei Sheng reminded Shen Zechuan in a whisper. "This is a signal for the various merchants to have fun among themselves."

Shen Zechuan breathed an acknowledgment and cracked his eyes open to look downstairs from his own drab seat. "It's a free market here. The Yan Clan plays mediator between the various parties and collects their commission. In a little while, send my order to sell the grain we brought with us."

"Human traffickers." Fei Sheng swept a keen eye over the people below. "That's a madam from Fanzhou."

The woman he pointed out was a rotund, heavily made-up woman decked out in flamboyant excess. When she had come to Dunzhou in the past, it was for the specific purpose of bringing children for Lei Changming; she had never dealt with any other merchants. But the Yan Clan's schism with Lei Changming had thwarted her business, and she had reluctantly switched to selling women she'd taken from the various prefectures of Zhongbo. In the hardest years, a dou of grain could be exchanged for an entire family, young and old.

“Master,” Fei Sheng began, “this madam’s name is Cuiqing. We dug into her background while monitoring the price of commodities in Fanzhou. She and Lei Changming go back a long way. She hails from Duanzhou, and even before Zhongbo’s fall, she was working as a procuress. Later, she moved to Fanzhou and continued to ply her trade there. Lei Changming himself forked over the deposit for her brothel; this was why she was happy to take the risk of trading in children.”

Grasping her handkerchief, Cuiqing turned to squeeze through a group of merchants. No one would dare take advantage of her here. On the contrary, *she* occasionally found ways to get her hands on whomever she took a fancy to. As an old hand in the three prefectures of Dunzhou, Duanzhou, and Fanzhou who had been in her trade for a long time, she had connections with men like Lei Changming and Cai Yu, but had yet to board a big ship like the Yan Clan.

Cuiqing’s generous figure squeezed a few men out of the way when she sat down. She crossed her legs and leaned casually against the table. The fair-faced man at her heels knelt to light her pipe. She tilted her head to take a long drag, then blew out a puff of smoke.

“Has my nephew not come down yet?” Cuiqing glanced toward the upper floors. “They’re taking such a long time. Even if he was having a tumble in the sheets he should be done by now, much less a meal.”

“What fine wares has the madam brought this time?” asked the merchant sitting nearest her. “Let’s have a look. If we see something suitable, we’d be keen too!”

“Bah.” Cuiqing examined the gold and jade bracelets on her right wrist. “Are you worthy of fine wares? The girls we brought this time aren’t tawdry whores worth a few dozen silver. These are tender virgins in the prime of their youth! If this were Qudu, you could forget about touching them for anything short of a few hundred taels.”

“How’s a virgin worth this sum? A whore is a whore; they ought to cost more the more seasoned they are!”

“Men like you deserve to fool around in those lousy two-bit brothels.” Cuiqing stroked her fair-faced companion’s cheek with one

lacquered fingernail and cackled. “In the old days, when Duanzhou was still the money-spinner of Great Zhou, all the girls in my stable were unrivaled beauties. When we used to rank courtesans, which of those cheap sluts from other brothels was ever able to beat my girls?”

Given how pathetically Cuiqing had fled during Zhongbo’s fall, she didn’t like to bring up the past. But the atmosphere tonight was good, with words of flattery thrown freely left and right. She took another drag on her pipe, looking very pleased with herself indeed as the others clustered around her.

“I don’t mean to boast, but in those days, girls like I brought with me today would scarcely be worthy of serving tea in my establishment.” The rouge on Cuiqing’s lips was a vivid scarlet, and her thick makeup concealed most of her wrinkles. From the contours of her face, one could guess she, too, had been a great beauty in her day.

“Come on, give us names!”

“The top three in the ranks were all girls from my establishment, and each one of them married well.” Cuiqing went on with a contemptuous smile, “Today, prostitutes and performers are indistinguishable, but it wasn’t so back then. You’d need to spend a pretty penny just to catch a glimpse of those who sold their arts, and at the height of their work they could simply refuse to see you. Those girls were more highly prized than the little misses from rich and prominent families. My nephew up there’s mother was also a girl of mine, the renowned Xiaoyinlei of the Chashi riverside. She married into the Zhu Clan in Duanzhou.”

Cuiqing pinched her young man’s chin and blew smoke into his face as she spoke. “But those were all common girls. The one I doted on most was number one in my establishment. Ever heard of ‘pure as white jade, fine as porcelain’? Back then, merely putting up her name would bring the whole city of Duanzhou to our doors. The emperor himself, far away in Qudu, longed for a glimpse of her exquisite face!”

The surrounding merchants clapped their hands in delight. “That’s Bai Cha!”

Wrapped in spiraling wisps of smoke, Cuiqing put up her hand, eyes far away as she reveled in the memory of those glory days. She snorted and murmured, “Bai Cha. Do you imagine ‘pure as white jade’ was empty flattery? She resembled jade and porcelain in the truest sense. If you all here were to see her now, every last one of you would kneel down to be her footrest if she so much as furrowed her brow. No one could bear to let her be sullied by the dust on the ground.”

The hall reeked of smoke, so thick several courtesans who were sitting with them coughed. But girls like them, who earned a living by selling their bodies, didn’t dare cover their noses for fear that the patrons beside them might think they were being disdained. Every one of them endured until their powdered cheeks flushed pink as they sat squeezed between clients, their backs tacky with sweat. Cuiqing ordered someone to fetch cards with the intention of playing some of the games that were all the rage in Qudu. Her handsome young man remained on his knees, massaging her legs.

Within a few moments, one of the courtesans couldn’t stand it anymore. She knitted her brows as she covered her mouth with a handkerchief to cough. The smoke smelled off to her. She took a few more sniffs, then jerked to her feet with a cry of surprise. “Fire!”

The denizens of the hall instantly leapt up in panic. Everyone watched as billows of smoke rose. The attendants who had been serving them had already perished. Cries of alarm echoed as everyone swept silver off the tables in a frenzy and tucked the money into their robes with no regard for whose was whose. The requested cards had scattered over the ground. Cuiqing, too big to escape through the crowd, tottered on her feet as she was jostled from every direction. The hairpiece by her temple lay discarded somewhere on the floor.

“Open the door!” Those at the front of the crowd pounded on it, shouting, “Why is the door locked?!”

Tables and chairs tipped over under the frantic mob. Some attempted to climb out the windows, but the windows, too, were sealed tight.

At last, Lei Jingzhe stuck his head out from behind the curtain and looked down.

When Cuiqing spied him, she waved a handkerchief and shouted, “My dear nephew! Help us open the door! The back hall is on fire!”

Fei Sheng’s hand was on the hilt of his blade. The moment Shen Zechuan gave the command, the Embroidered Uniform Guard would swarm the building. But Shen Zechuan continued to drink his tea without a word.

Fei Sheng couldn’t help but call out, “Master—”

At that moment, a hand grabbed onto the railing in front of Lei Jingzhe, and a man heaved himself up over it. Lei Jingzhe’s countenance instantly changed. He jumped backward to dodge his attacker’s incoming scimitar and knocked the screen behind him over with a loud crash, exposing the table and chairs in the middle. To their surprise, Lei Jingzhe himself was the only one there.

“He didn’t invite anyone at all,” Fei Sheng blurted in shock. “This was bait! A gambit meant to lure a snake from its hole!”

Shen Zechuan felt for his folding fan, only belatedly remembering he had broken it. He drained the tea in his cup and watched the men Lei Jingzhe had left downstairs rush up to meet him. Oddly, other than the area Lei Jingzhe was in, the rest of the fifth floor was quiet.

Fei Sheng, sharp-eyed, stuck his head out and stared at the fight across from them. He watched carefully for a moment as they exchanged blows, then exclaimed in bewilderment, “Master, this man is also a Scorpion.”

The man who’d come to assassinate Lei Jingzhe had inadvertently exposed the side of his neck as he swung his blade, revealing a scorpion tattoo identical to Jida’s.

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Chapter 172:
Heru

INTERNAL STRIFE!

Fei Sheng took in the scene before him. Men were fighting tooth and nail on the other side of the mezzanine. Lei Jingzhe's injuries had yet to fully heal, and he was clearly having difficulty parrying his assailant's savage attacks. It was all he could do to dodge. Amid the blows traded by the two opposing groups of Scorpions in the cramped private room, Shen Zechuan saw flashes of scimitars and pike daggers.

Standing at his side, Fei Sheng itched to take action. He badly wanted to make up for the humiliation suffered earlier that day and reclaim the dignity of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, which had been making mistake after mistake. Heaven had not failed him: It had arranged such a cutthroat scene to give him a helping hand. He drew his Xiuchun saber. "Master, this is our chance to take down Lei Jingzhe and make him stand trial!"

"What's the hurry?" Shen Zechuan's tone was measured. "They're giving us a free show."

Puzzled, Fei Sheng looked back at Lei Jingzhe. He now saw how nervous the bandit looked, not at all like a mastermind whose plan was unfolding as expected. Both sides were equally matched, and the air was filled with the sound of shattering as glazed lamps and jade vases were smashed to pieces in the fight. He observed carefully and noticed Lei Jingzhe was already attempting to retreat.

It had been pandemonium downstairs—but after the thick smoke dispersed, all was quiet again. The lights still hung high, huge, glazed palace lanterns with various dazzling patterns glowing in the center of the main hall. The dead maidservants and attendants were swiftly disposed of, and even the bloodstains on the ground were wiped clean. With a flick of the curtain at the back of the hall, new maidservants came pouring in bearing freshly laid trays. They picked up the overturned tables and chairs

and pulled the various merchants back into position with smiles and light chatter.

A bronze gong sounded, and the attendant who had welcomed them at the brokerage stepped onto the stage in a new robe. He struck the gong he held a few more times and announced in a ringing voice, “Mount Luo’s Chief of Bandits, Lei Jingzhe, versus Dunzhou’s Little Scorpion, Haerigu. Tonight, two martial experts meet—who will live and who will die? Gentlemen, place your bets!”

Fei Sheng had never expected such a turn of events. He thought he’d seen every kind of unpredictable and tumultuous situation in Qudu, yet now he blurted out in shock, “They’re betting on lives?!”

The bamboo blinds in the remaining fifth-floor rooms promptly lifted to reveal wealthy merchants in comfortable seats, drinking their tea, waving their fans, and smoking their pipes. Lei Jingzhe moved to leap out the window and make his escape, only to realize it had been nailed shut well beforehand.

“I’ve long heard the young master of the Yan Clan doesn’t do anything unless it will profit him,” Shen Zechuan said. “To think he could even find profit in a trade like this.”

The screen in one particular private room was moved aside, and the swift sounds of abacus beads flicking rang out like pelting rain. The young man behind the screen looked up from his counting and grinned. “Money makes the world go round; even blood brothers have to pay their debts. Might as well make the most of it!” He set down the abacus and gripped the rail, sticking his head out and giving Fei Sheng a once-over. Then he winked at Shen Zechuan and smiled. “Say, it’s not easy to find an Embroidered Uniform Guard. This one is good-looking, and he’s tall enough too. I can take him to Madam Cuiqing later as an apology. Governor, sell him to me, okay?”

Hearing him so casually expose Shen Zechuan’s identity, Fei Sheng instinctively tightened his grip on his blade and stood before Shen Zechuan to shield him. This man was perhaps three or four years older than Ding Tao, but he still had a childish air about him. With his fair skin and fine

features, and those eyes that seemed soaked in honey, he looked particularly likable.

Upon seeing him, Lei Jingzhe, on the opposite end of the mezzanine, flew into a rage. Barely able to hold himself back, he spat, “The young master deceived me! You’d offend Gedal for the sake of a couple of Scorpions?!”

“Gedal is backwater on the far side of the Chashi River.” Yan Heru straightened up. “Your uncle owes me five hundred eighty thousand taels of silver; *you* owe me three hundred forty thousand. Are you too good to pay your debts?”

Lei Jingzhe snapped off a chair leg and dove out of the way of the glinting blade of his attacker. The confrontation with Xiao Chiye had set him back considerably, and he had been forced to rely on Li Xiong for an escape he only managed by the skin of his teeth. Now he found himself surrounded once again—except this time he had played right into the hands of someone he considered an ally.

Yan Heru rested his arms on the railing, legs swinging under his chair. Amused by the sight of Lei Jingzhe fighting for his life, he shouted toward the crowd downstairs: “A battle between two heavyweights is a rare sight indeed, so place your bets—and hands off after! Double your profit if you win, and if you lose—heh, treat it as an evening’s entertainment! I, Yan Heru, won’t let anyone walk out of Dunzhou so broke he can’t buy pants to cover his ass.”

Lei Jingzhe was trapped in a deadly battle for his life. He had brought only thirty men because he had foolishly trusted Yan Heru’s lies. Now that Lei Jingzhe had the support of the Biansha Horsemen along with the four hundred Scorpions stationed in Dunzhou, he had been sure Yan Heru would show him respect if the Yan Clan still intended to do business in the east. But for all his machinations, Lei Jingzhe had never expected Shen Zechuan, of all people, to seize those military supplies.

An iron cage had been set up in the hall. Both Lei Jingzhe and the enemy Scorpions had suffered heavy casualties; more than half their men were wounded or dead. Lei Jingzhe spoke to the man who had come to

assassinate him in the Biansha tongue: “Haerigu, we’re all brothers from Gedal—why tear each other apart here? Join forces with me now, and I won’t ask what happened to those supplies!”

But the other man did not respond; he only swept his wavy mess of hair back before pulling out his pike dagger to pounce on Lei Jingzhe once again.

Yan Heru poured himself a cup of wine. “Wanna know how I knew you’d come?”

“Liu’er’s informants all have their price.” Shen Zechuan peeled an orange and brought a segment to his mouth. “As long as the money is good, any news can be resold.”

Yan Heru laughed again. “See, it sounds like I’m a rube when you put it that way, but I actually *did* have a hunch. Huaizhou’s surplus grain has all gone eastward into Cizhou’s granaries. Nobody could purchase grain in such large quantities but you, Shen Zechuan.”

“What a coincidence, then,” Shen Zechuan said, “to be meeting you here.”

“Sweet talker,” said Yan Heru. “Your Lordship was waiting for the opportunity, weren’t you? But I’m stumped—how’d you know the person Lei Jingzhe invited tonight was *me*?”

Shen Zechuan finished the orange before continuing. “Lei Jingzhe’s current trip to Dunzhou to search the arriving goods surely ruffled the feathers of all the merchants in the city, yet the Yan Clan didn’t step forward to obstruct him. This suggests you were already in communication. In that case, he would have had to invite you over for a drink, would he not? He could also seize the opportunity to mend his relationship with the Yan Clan—and why wouldn’t he? To that end, he went as far as to select a restaurant owned by the Yan Clan to show his sincerity.”

Delighted, Yan Heru exclaimed, “You’re so smart!”

Yan Heru placed his own interests first in everything he did, yet he appeared remarkably naive as he clutched that heavy golden abacus to his chest like a child-god of wealth. If not for the fact that he dripped gold and

jade from head to toe, Fei Sheng would never have guessed this young man was the current head of the Yan Clan if he passed him on the street.

Across the mezzanine, Lei Jingzhe was already flagging as yet another wave of men rushed up from below. His men were vastly outnumbered, trapped in the private room. Still, he was unwilling to yield. The Scorpions with him clustered toward the walls and smashed the window panels in with their elbows.

The night breeze gusted in through the splintered windows. Lei Jingzhe didn't rush forward but merely watched as the Scorpion who had punched the opening stuck his head out, only to meet with calamity: He was instantly decapitated.

Yan Heru huffed and pouted. "This is *my* establishment. You'll leave when I tell you to leave, and stay when I tell you to stay!"

The building was teeming with people both inside and out.

The circle of men around Lei Jingzhe slowly closed in. The crowd of merchants on the bottom floor were men whose loyalties shifted like the tide. When they saw Lei Jingzhe was doomed, they hurried to follow in Yan Heru's footsteps and place their bets against him. Everyone was waiting for him to die; the atmosphere crackled with restlessness. Cuiqing clutched at her handkerchief, not bashful in the least as she shed the stacks of bracelets on her arms and bet everything on Haerigu. She had long since forgotten about her dear nephew, Lei Jingzhe.

"Did you decide to kill Lei Jingzhe because you knew I was in Dunzhou?" Shen Zechuan asked out of the blue.

"That's right," Yan Heru answered, yawning. "A merchant like me's got to go where the wind blows. This trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou is interesting. You've got the Libei Armored Cavalry for added security, and if you head further north, you can clean up at Libei's trade market. Now imagine if we join forces—the three northeast territories of Great Zhou will be as good as ours, right? I keep a chokehold on routes through Hezhou to block Qidong's military provisions for you, and you take me along for the ride up north. You scratch my back, I scratch yours." As he

spoke, he shifted forward, interested. “The way I see it, you’re gunning for Qudu. You have a bright future ahead of you. Possibilities everywhere.”

“So I see.” Shen Zechuan rose and motioned for Fei Sheng to get his cloak.

“Yup.” Yan Heru rocked back in his chair as he looked out at the dancing figures and asked, frowning, “Leaving so soon? The show isn’t over—he isn’t dead yet. Don’t you want Lei Jingzhe’s head?”

Shen Zechuan fastened his cloak and looked back. “Is anyone tending to those four hundred Scorpions?”

“Your Lordship is here,” Yan Heru answered. “Have your Cizhou Garrison Troops annihilate them.”

“In that case I must apologize,” Shen Zechuan said with a smile. “I brought only a dozen men with me.”

The words had scarcely left Shen Zechuan’s mouth when the doors of the main hall crashed open. Yan Heru craned his neck for a look. Scorpions had filled the street outside; they had even taken out the last remaining head cart in the Dunzhou armory, hiding untold men beneath its covered roof.

Lei Jingzhe leapt onto the railing and whistled sharply to signal the Scorpions to attack. The men guarding the building were all martial masters Yan Heru had paid handsomely, but pitting them against Scorpions specially trained to fight the Libei Armored Cavalry was akin to throwing an egg against a rock. In no time, their broadswords and daggers were flung away by the swinging hammers.

A crash rang out as a chair overturned; Yan Heru bunched up his robe and climbed to his feet cradling his golden abacus, intending to flee. The moment he opened the door of the private room, he bumped into Fei Sheng, who lifted him by the back of his collar. As his feet left the ground, Yan Heru cried out, “What the hell?! We’re on the same side!”

Yan Heru’s guards lunged forward to seize him back, but the Embroidered Uniform Guard with Shen Zechuan had already risen with blades drawn.

“Let’s leave together,” Shen Zechuan said. “We can get to know each other on the way.”

Unable to break free, Yan Heru suffered Fei Sheng carrying him downstairs like a caught quail as he shouted, “Haerigu, we’re leaving! Come on!”

Chaos had descended over the hall. The Biansha Scorpions didn’t give a damn whom they killed and swung their hammers at anyone who crossed their path. Cuiqing watched blood and brain matter splatter out of the head of the man before her and stain her robes. Rattled, she gripped the table for support and recalled the savagery of the Biansha Horsemen when they had massacred the city years ago. As she scrambled backward in an attempt to dodge hammers, she couldn’t help but shriek, “Nephew, save me!”

The ground floor was mayhem, and the exit was completely blocked off by the crowd. Keeping a firm grasp on Yan Heru, Fei Sheng kicked the window of Shen Zechuan’s private room open and shoved Yan Heru out.

Yan Heru squinched his eyes shut and yelled into the wind, “Don’t strike! I’m your master!”

The martial masters standing guard outside hastily sheathed their blades. The wind whistled past. Yan Heru struggled to open his eyes and said resentfully, “Why the hell did you come here without your troops?!”

“Master, there’s a shop just below here, and our carriage waits across the street,” Fei Sheng said to Shen Zechuan.

When Yan Heru heard that, he clung on to the window frame and shook his head desperately. “I’m not going this way! I’m no martial artist __”

Shen Zechuan didn’t waste his breath on him. With a quick flick of his leg, he kicked Yan Heru down.

Wind filled Yan Heru’s open mouth as he plummeted, arms and legs flailing as he watched the ground surge up to meet him. The fabric canopy of the shop below sank under his weight as he slammed into it, but did not rip. Fei Sheng lifted Yan Heru clear with one hand, grabbed the ledge of the

building with the other, and swung in midair for a moment before leaping off and landing steadily on his feet.

The men of the Embroidered Uniform Guard were all strong and agile; the entire sequence was executed with ease. The instant Fei Sheng's feet touched the ground, he tossed Yan Heru to his subordinate, took two swift steps back, and shouted, "Master!"

Shen Zechuan landed deftly on the eaves, moved gracefully across the canopy, and stepped on Fei Sheng's shoulder before alighting on the ground. All hell had broken loose inside the building as the sound of slaughter rose through the roof. Not daring to confront the Scorpions head-on, Fei Sheng escorted Shen Zechuan into the carriage and waved his hand in the signal to withdraw.

Moving swiftly, the Embroidered Uniform Guard steered the carriage into the busy streets and left the restaurant behind in the blink of an eye.

Lei Jingzhe threw the windows open, but Yan Heru had vanished without a trace. He pounded his fist against the frame in a fury and ordered his men in the Biansha tongue: "Don't let these traitors escape."

It was silent all around when the carriage finally stopped.

Yan Heru huddled against the wall of the carriage, clutching the abacus to his chest as he pleaded. "Now hang on—we can talk it over, and the prices are all negotiable. Don't be mad, Your Lordship!"

Shen Zechuan took off his brimmed hat and tossed it aside, then called to Fei Sheng, "Lift the curtain."

Fei Sheng, standing outside, did as he was told, and a putrid smell wafted out of the carriage. Fei Sheng wrinkled his nose, and sure enough, Yan Heru said with an abashed smile, "Whenever I'm anxious, I get gassy."

The Embroidered Uniform Guard outside burst into a fit of coughing.

Shen Zechuan barked out a laugh, and Yan Heru felt a chill run down his spine. He scrambled to press himself back against the wall of the carriage even before Shen Zechuan said gently, "Strip him."

“My mother was right!” Yan Heru was now very anxious indeed. “Good-looking men are all beasts! D-don’t do this! I’m not into men!”

Fei Sheng held down the back of Yan Heru’s head and stripped him in no time, although he fortunately left his pants untouched—nights were chilly in Dunzhou in the eighth month, and Yan Heru, that delicate and fair-skinned lad, was so cold his teeth were chattering.

“Master, there’s no scorpion on him,” Fei Sheng reported.

Shen Zechuan folded his arms over his chest, pinned his gaze on Yan Heru, and got straight to the point: “What’s your relationship to the Scorpions?”

Yan Heru rubbed his bare arms and blinked a pair of doe eyes, shivering so hard he stuttered. “Wh-why are you asking me? Your Lordship, you’ve got it b-backward. You should be asking what *your* relationship to the Scorpions is.”

Shen Zechuan’s eyes were dark and deep. “And just what is my relationship to the Scorpions?”

After a fraught moment of silence, Yan Heru answered innocently, “I have no idea.”

“Fei Sheng,” Shen Zechuan called out.

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Fei Sheng reached in to drag Yan Heru out of the carriage. On seeing this, Yan Heru started to struggle. “I said I don’t know! Haerigu, Haerigu! You tell him!”

A man tumbled out from behind the carriage and fell to the ground panting—the same one who had climbed over the railing to assassinate Lei Jingzhe earlier. His prominent nose and deep-set eyes placed him as a member of the Biansha tribes, but he had black hair and black eyes, and the contours of his face were softer than those of Huhelu or Hassen. A turn of his head revealed the scorpion tattoo at the side of his neck. The Embroidered Uniform Guard swiftly trained their swords on him.

Haerigu was wounded. As he pressed a hand over the hasty bandage job, he looked at Shen Zechuan behind a sea of drawn blades and breathed, “Son of Gedal.”

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Chapter 173:
Black and White

IT WAS THE SECOND TIME Shen Zechuan had heard the name *Gedal*.

Gedal was a settlement on the east bank of the Chashi River, in Biansha territory. In the past, it had been a safe haven for the Zhongbo bandits. Shen Zechuan was certain he had never been there before. His knowledge of Gedal was limited to the portrait of his mother, Bai Cha, that Li Xiong had once mentioned. Following Haerigu's logic, Shen Zechuan could also be called a son of Zhongbo.

"We are both sons of Gedal." Haerigu got to his feet, his eyes flashing as his gaze wandered over the Embroidered Uniform Guard surrounding him. He lifted his hands in surrender. "We have good reason to sit down for a chat."

Shen Zechuan was unmoved. "My brother died on the battlefield, at the Chashi Sinkhole. Before you explain anything more, know we are enemies."

"Your enemy is the Biansha Horsemen." Haerigu tightened the bandage around his wound. "I'm the enemy of your enemy. We can be friends."

"Sure, friend," Shen Zechuan said. "What do you want to chat about?"

Haerigu pursed his pale lips and paused before saying, "We can join forces to kill Lei Jingzhe."

Moonlight cut across the shadows in the carriage. Shen Zechuan's expression was cold and detached. His silence made his position clear: If Haerigu continued to beat around the bush, he would not deign to respond.

"The emperor of Zhou is dead, and the emperor's mother is overseeing the government. You were driven out of Qudu and fled back to Zhongbo. You want revenge, and you want to rise again." Haerigu's

expression as he looked at Shen Zechuan was complicated. “You are swallowing up Zhongbo as we speak.”

Elbows propped on his knees, Shen Zechuan leaned out of the shadows and looked down at Haerigu. “Your information is extremely detailed.”

Haerigu kept his hands raised as though pacifying some kind of beast. “This is information I must have if I’m to survive in Zhongbo. I don’t mean to offend you. You’ve erected your own city walls in the west, and now you want to strike out east and reclaim Dunzhou, Duanzhou, and even the Chashi Sinkhole. But Lei Jingzhe stands in your way. If you can’t kill him, he’ll only make trouble for you. Brother, I want to kill him too—so why not work together?”

Shen Zechuan gestured to the side of his own neck. “You both have the same tattoo.”

“Because we are both sons of Gedal,” Haerigu repeated. “Lei Jingzhe is a White Scorpion. They are men from Zhou who have defected to Amur.” Haerigu moved his collar aside to reveal the scorpion on the side of his neck. “I’m a Black Scorpion.”

Fei Sheng studied it carefully. “There’s no difference between your tattoos.”

“We don’t tell each other apart by our tattoos,” Haerigu explained. “The tattoos are just a mark the Biansha used to distinguish those from Gedal from others.”

“Gedal lies within Biansha’s borders. In its early days, it fell under the control of the Liaoying tribe,” Shen Zechuan mused. “So what’s the difference between you and the rest of the Biansha tribesmen?”

“If you understood the history of the Liaoying tribe, you would understand why we were differentiated.” Haerigu resettled his collar. “Before the Liaoying tribe had Amur, they were servants who looked after the falcons for the other major tribes. Under their control, Gedal was lower than dirt. The bandits of Zhongbo came to Gedal to sell women. These women were popular with the major tribes—the noble Hanma tribe, in particular, was very fond of women from Great Zhou.”

“But those bandits were suppressed.” Fei Sheng tossed a waterskin to Haerigu. “While those bandits ran rampant along the Chashi River, women from decent families in Duanzhou suffered unimaginably. The Zhu Clan in Duanzhou couldn’t deal with it themselves; they reported it to Shen Wei and requested Dunzhou deploy troops to assist. The commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops, Tantai Long, sent his troops to Gedal to crush the bandits.”

“This was only a temporary setback.” Haerigu took the waterskin. “The bandits had been under the protection of the Liaoying tribe. They threw in their lot with the Liaoying tribe and became their slaves, but they were never respected. They became the lowest class of people among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha and continued to kidnap women for the tribesmen. The captured women were sent off to various tribes, where they became chattel.”

Tantai Long had failed to eradicate the bandits completely. It didn’t take long for them to return to Gedal, where they re-established their base.

“The children born to Zhou women were called *umungyun*.” Haerigu tugged at his lank black hair. “In the tongue of Great Zhou, that means *bastard*. These bastards were reviled in the major tribes; if they were allowed to grow up, they would inherit a portion of the cattle and sheep that belonged to the pureblooded Biansha. The tribes drowned them in the Chashi River, or threw them back to Gedal.”

Fei Sheng, who had been born into the Fei Clan, was unable to comprehend this behavior. “But these children all carry the blood of the tribes. Even if their mothers weren’t considered honorable, there’s no need to go so far as to drown them, is there?”

“Do you know of Hassen? He’s the one son Amur has truly acknowledged. The Twelve Tribes are different from Great Zhou. In the desert, women bear and rear the tribes’ children, and control the distribution of cattle and sheep. They are indispensable to survival and stand on an equal footing with men. The status of the mother determines the future of a child. Amur has many sons, plenty of smart ones among them, but from the moment they were born, they lacked the qualifications to challenge Hassen for power, precisely because Hassen’s mother is the most honored woman

in the Hanma tribe. She played a pivotal role in Amur's formation of his elite forces in the north." Haerigu took a few sips of water. "Bastards are unworthy of taking on the surnames of the tribes, so we were branded with a tattoo, along with the bandits."

Shen Zechuan made some quick inferences. "Since you distinguish between black and white, you must each have your own uses."

"Before that, you have to understand one thing. 'Scorpion' is a form of address that only came about after Amur's rise to power. Before Amur's time, Gedal was just a place where the bastards scraped out a living. It was only after his rise that Gedal was truly put to use. White Scorpions, who looked like the people of Great Zhou, could infiltrate the empire." Haerigu screwed the waterskin shut and mimed walking across the air with two fingers. "They could penetrate deep within Zhou's borders and have played their roles to unimaginable effect in the past decade or so. Meanwhile, the Black Scorpions remain in Gedal, where Amur sends the best teachers to train us to stand up to the Libei Armored Cavalry."

"Mutual assistance between black and white—you were helping each other." Realization dawned on Shen Zechuan. "There are no iron mines in the desert. To equip yourselves with that kind of hammer, you'd have to steal the raw materials from the empire."

"That's right." Haerigu tossed the waterskin back to Fei Sheng. "The White Scorpions secured equipment and grain for us from within Great Zhou. And then there were the military maps."

The map of the six prefectures of Zhongbo!

"Whose information did Amur act on six years ago when he attacked Zhongbo?"

Haerigu spread his hands. "I don't know. I wasn't involved. But I can tell you Amur has countless links to Qudu. The fall of Zhongbo was merely a trial run, meant to test the waters. And it proved remarkably effective—afterward, Libei was shackled, and the repercussions are still being felt even now, with this slow disintegration of the Zhou empire."

Fei Sheng took in a careful breath and looked at Shen Zechuan in shock.

“Why do you call me a son of Gedal?” The jade earring on Shen Zechuan’s right ear glinted.

Haerigu inclined his head. “Because Bai Cha divided us—”

The whistle of an arrow piercing the wind drowned out the rest, and an arrowhead punched through the wall of the carriage. Yan Heru had been playing dead, too afraid to make a sound. Now he shrieked, “They’re here!”

Fei Sheng yanked the curtains down and called, “Mount your horses!”

The Embroidered Uniform Guard fell into formation, and the carriage charged into the darkness. Yan Heru was thrown backward in his seat. The downtown streets of Dunzhou were broad and spacious, having been expanded by the Yan Clan itself to facilitate the smooth passage of merchants’ wagons. Even at this hour the streets were bustling with activity, carriages coming and going in never-ending streams.

Yan Heru lurched this way and that as he pulled on his robes and snapped, “Head for the Prince of Jianxing’s old manor! I tore down the old place and built a private manor there. There are over a hundred guards in my compound!”

Fei Sheng promptly turned the horses around.

The glazed tiles of the Prince of Jianxing’s manor had long been torn down. After Shen Wei’s self-immolation here, all that had been left was a dilapidated ruin. Yan Heru appreciated the property, so he had reconstructed the compound into a private manor modeled after those in Qudu. A tall tower with double-eaved roofs had been built within the walls; if one were to stand atop it, they would be treated to a panoramic view of Dunzhou.

Fei Sheng surveyed the manor carefully before entering. He found Yan Heru’s tastes rather strange. He had had a brick wall built along the outer perimeter, then knocked holes in that wall to install crossbows, with the mechanism connected to the parapet running around the top. The wall looked thick enough to withstand an assault from a catapult.

“I’m a businessman; I have to watch my back. There are plenty of wretches who would try something if they could. I cherish my life, so naturally I need a safe haven in Dunzhou—I couldn’t sleep at night without an impregnable fortress.” Yan Heru invited Shen Zechuan up the stairs of the tower, gesturing with his golden abacus. “This place is known as Fuxian Peak. Yeah, because it’s so tall you can practically touch the immortals. Your Lordship, follow me upstairs; we can have a drink and enjoy ourselves. We’ll watch that fool Lei Jingzhe lose it from frustration outside the walls.”

Fei Sheng couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Aren’t you afraid he’ll fight his way in and hack off your head?”

Yan Heru glanced back from atop the stairs and threw Fei Sheng a brilliant smile. “What’s there to fear? A real man isn’t afraid of a scar or two. I guess my head could roll, but once I’m reincarnated, I’ll be a hero again in eighteen short years!”

His words were flippant, but it was true that he was unafraid. He was crucial to the business of too many merchants in Zhongbo. So many people depended on him for their livelihoods that, despite suffering such a massive humiliation tonight, Lei Jingzhe wouldn’t dare kill him outright. Yan Heru still had Hezhou behind him. In reality, Lei Jingzhe’s relentless pursuit was directed at Haerigu.

The little brat was extremely crafty.

Shen Zechuan had guessed the reason Lei Jingzhe and Haerigu were embroiled in such a fierce fight in Dunzhou was thanks to Yan Heru adding fuel to the fire. When his past support of Lei Changming had failed to reap rewards, it was only by leveraging his connections that Yan Heru retained control of the brokerage in Dunzhou. Had it been anyone else, this business would have been long gone. It made sense that he was apprehensive about Lei Jingzhe becoming too powerful here. He had secretly funded Haerigu’s Black Scorpions, pitting them against Lei Jingzhe’s faction until they both eventually had to rely on the Yan Clan.

The maidservants filed in and lit the lanterns, one at a time down the row. Thick, heavy draperies were lifted, and pearly, sheer fabrics were let

down to take their place. There was even a small covered walkway that ran the perimeter of the tower, draped with climbing figs and devils' ivy and accompanied by a narrow, murmuring stream the width of one's arm. An open-air pavilion rose up in the center, and a refined rock garden sat to its side. Gazing out into the distance from the railing, the entire sky of stars seemed within reach, along with a clear view of the lanterns down in the streets of Dunzhou.

"This tower was built so you could climb up to this view," said Yan Heru when they reached the top. "If you stand here and look way out east, you'll see the Chashi River like a jade belt around a minister's waist. Can't get a view like this anywhere else." Yan Heru leaned against the railing and looked at Shen Zechuan. "There's no way you can leave Dunzhou for the time being. Why doesn't Your Lordship stay here? We can take our time talking business."

Shen Zechuan's overcoat fluttered in the wind as he gripped the railing and looked down. He could see Lei Jingzhe's forces charging through the streets. "You certainly are dauntless."

Yan Heru flicked the beads on the golden abacus. "Money is king. As long as I have it, Lei Jingzhe himself has to call me granddaddy. I have nothing to fear. Now, *Your Lordship* will find yourself in some trouble if the Cizhou Garrison Troops really aren't coming."

"I come and go silently," Shen Zechuan said. "It's easy for me to leave if I wish to."

"But Bai Cha is the reason you came to Dunzhou." Yan Heru stood beside him at the railing and smiled. "Haerigu knows everything. You almost got the whole story—you must be burning with curiosity now. No one knows Bai Cha's relationship to the Scorpions better than him. Your Lordship, I mean it about doing business with you. Say yes, and I'll put Haerigu at your beck and call. If we join forces to get rid of Lei Jingzhe, occupy the territories in the north and east, and develop that trade route you want, silver will flow in like water, no? What happened in Chazhou can be scrubbed from the books; I won't hold Cai Yu's death against you."

Shen Zechuan leaned over the railing and laughed.

Yan Heru's smile vanished. "What are you laughing at?"

"Lei Jingzhe is coming here tonight for Haerigu. If you don't hand him over, he'll settle the score with you instead. You're hoping to offer me a forfeited pawn to trick me into doing business with you. A deal so good simply doesn't exist." Shen Zechuan looked out east, past Dunzhou's city walls toward Duanzhou. "The trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou belongs to me. If you want a piece of that pie, you must first convince me of the advantages."

Yan Heru fell silent as he faced the wide expanse of the night, then laughed again. "Is Your Lordship still trying to pull the wool over my eyes? *Now?* Without your troops, you're a cornered dog. I won't hand Haerigu over, but I *could* hand you over."

"You plotted to butcher Lei Jingzhe tonight. Considering Lei Jingzhe's character, this will be a feud inked in blood. Even if he tolerates you momentarily for the sake of money, he will never forget this insult. What's more, you've already shown your hand—Haerigu." Shen Zechuan tilted his chin up slightly to catch the breeze. "Even if Lei Jingzhe was willing to bury the hatchet with you, the Twelve Tribes of Biansha who back him will think differently."

Haerigu was more than one man. He had brought along a group of Scorpions similarly living a vagabond life in Zhongbo. These people hid themselves in every nook and cranny, and most of them had defected from Gedal. Yan Heru had provided them with financial assistance in order to keep Lei Jingzhe in check, but there was no doubt the Twelve Tribes of Biansha would settle this score.

"I, at least, won't die here tonight," Yan Heru said softly.

"Then shall we both die?" Shen Zechuan tapped his icy fingers on the railing. "Hand me over to Lei Jingzhe now. I'll wait for you in the underworld."

Yan Heru snorted childishly. "After tonight, I have plenty of ways to leave Dunzhou if I need to."

"Then let me tell you this." Shen Zechuan glanced at him from the corner of his pitch-black eyes. "If I die, Dunzhou and Duanzhou die with

me. No one will remember Zhongbo's lost territories. Qudu is absorbed with its own affairs, and Libei and Qidong can't be in two places at once. This place is a wide-open, strategic gateway to the empire that the Biansha Horsemen can access by simply crossing the river. The only reason they didn't launch an assault these past six years was because the granaries of Zhongbo had yet to be filled. Now the time is ripe, and the empire is torn asunder. Sooner or later, this place will become the territory of Biansha."

"Xiao Fangxu won't sit around while that happens—this place affects Libei's battlegrounds in the southeast," Yan Heru countered quickly. "Qi Zhuyin has a strong army too. You're just trying to scare me! Shen Zechuan, without you, Zhongbo may see a few more self-proclaimed kings pop up, but the bigger picture won't change at all!"

"In that case"—Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows slightly—"why go to such lengths to convince me?"

Shit. Yan Heru berated himself. To think he had let Shen Zechuan lead him by the nose!

A thunderous rumble sounded beneath them. Yan Heru looked and couldn't help but freeze. "Why are there so many people…?"

"Since setting foot in Dunzhou, I've been puzzled by a mystery. There's a perfectly good road leading right to Duanzhou. Why did Lei Jingzhe ignore what was right in front of him to take a longer route north? Then there was his efficient search of all the wares coming into the city. My guess is this isn't the first time he's been robbed. The Scorpions hiding here are thorns in his side." Shen Zechuan smiled thinly. "Even I could guess you were the one funding Haerigu. Do you really think Lei Jingzhe couldn't? He came prepared this time. That invitation was indeed meant to lure a snake out of its hole, but the one who took the bait was you."

The lanterns along the streets toppled over as the pounding of hooves grew louder, announcing a cavalry with no end in sight, like a bank of dark clouds devouring the river of lights below. The troops Lei Jingzhe had brought with him had been hiding outside the city for the sole purpose of ending the mortal malady that was Haerigu once and for all. Fei Sheng was first to spot the saker falcons cutting through the night sky. He walked a

brisk circuit around the railing and realized those dark clouds were roiling across the entire city of Dunzhou.

“He doesn’t dare kill me.” Yan Heru grabbed his golden abacus, clutched it tight, and took several panicked steps backward. “Hezhou…”

The covered, fortified head cart Lei Jingzhe had brought crashed into the front gates. Unable to withstand the impact, the iron latch of the door let out a shriek of protest. Horses snorted urgently, while circling saker falcons stirred up the blanket of clouds. The starry sky of earlier had dimmed, leaving behind only the wind, howling without cease.

All the schemes in the world were useless in the face of a strong army. These iron hooves had had no qualms about trampling the heart of Zhongbo once before. Who could say they wouldn’t do it again?

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Chapter 174:
Mad Dog

LEI JINGZHE had thrown open Dunzhou's armory; no matter how sturdily constructed this manor might be, it wouldn't stand up to a blow from a siege engine built for war. The crossbow bolts from its walls couldn't penetrate the shield of the head cart, and the door latch snapped from the impact of the crash. Before the crossbows could be reloaded for a second shot, the Biansha Horsemen were inside.

Fei Sheng stepped forward to take Shen Zechuan's elbow and said, urgent, "Master, we should go out the back; let's find a way to leave the city under cover of darkness!"

"Lei Jingzhe wants to round up Haerigu and his people tonight." Shen Zechuan stood against the wind. "He prepared meticulously for this. See how he's used such a massive force to besiege the city—he won't have left any openings. It's too late to think of leaving now."

Knowing escape was impossible, Fei Sheng watched as the compound was surrounded. But he was well aware he had to risk his life to ensure Shen Zechuan remained safe and sound, so he gripped the hilt of his blade tighter and stood firm beside Shen Zechuan. The Embroidered Uniform Guard behind him all looked somber, as if about to come face to face with a formidable foe. For a moment, the atmosphere was incredibly grim.

The slim crescent of the moon was like a shining thread concealed among dark clouds. Heavy fog hung in the sky above them, bearing down. There was no stopping the destructive force that was in motion. Shen Zechuan was still leaning over the railing, letting his gaze roam over the lights of Dunzhou—it was the first time he had ever gotten a clear look at the city.

Fei Sheng stood in silence. Together with the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he kept his eyes on Shen Zechuan amid the deafening sounds of the

melee below. Strangely, he was no longer nervous, even as he stared death in the eye.

In the past, Fei Sheng had wanted to follow Xiao Chiye because Xiao Chiye had the magnetic spirit of a trailblazer. On the day he and Shen Zechuan had rebelled and fled Qudu, Fei Sheng had followed them willingly and wholeheartedly. But Xiao Chiye had refused to accept him under his command, so he had no choice but to step back and work under Shen Zechuan instead.

Shen Zechuan had no such magnetism.

He was a controversial figure, and his face made him the subject of gossip and criticism in Qudu. Shen Wei was a threshold across the floor—many would rather stand outside and scrutinize him, as if whether he lived or died should be determined by their sprays of spittle. When he'd left the Temple of Guilt, everyone had treated him as a noble-clan blade that replaced Shen Wei, an imperial dog under the empress dowager's command. But subsequent events had far deviated from everyone's expectations. In that desperate struggle for power, he had quietly and steadily risen to the top. Before his detractors realized it, he was standing at the heart of the political storm. Shen Zechuan did not possess Xiao Chiye's imposing air nor his sturdy vitality, yet his slight back was a protective barrier whenever he stood at the head of the fray. Even when the storm raged and left a trail of destruction in its wake, all was dry, calm silence for those behind him as long as he remained standing.

Fei Sheng closed his eyes and cleared his mind of distraction. His heart was at ease—this sense of tranquility required no words of encouragement. He had abandoned Ji Lei and forsaken Han Cheng, following whoever beckoned based on the opportunity they offered in the moment; all this time, he had been unable to understand the trust Chen Yang and Gu Jin placed in Xiao Chiye. But as he stood in the lee of the wind behind Shen Zechuan and opened his eyes once again, he finally felt that trust.

Everyone in the world wanted to be like Xiao Chiye.

But there could be no other like Shen Lanzhou!

Horses charged through the broken doors beneath them, while dark clouds rolled overhead. Fei Sheng, who had spent his life currying favor for his own selfish gain, drew his blade and kicked over the wooden chair beside him, sending it crashing into the Biansha Horsemen racing up the stairway. He tore off a strip of his outer robe and wrapped the hilt of his saber to his hand, then snatched up a cup of wine on the table and said to the Embroidered Uniform Guard members around him, “Tonight, even if the sky falls and the earth collapses, we must ensure Master remains safe and sound. Here we are, chatting and drinking, laughing even as we’re surrounded by powerful enemies—this is a rare sight, and an honor we never had while serving the emperor.”

Fei Sheng tipped the wine back, letting it trickle down and soak the front of his clothes. He smashed the bowl on the ground, then wiped his mouth and burst into wild laughter. “This battle will make legends out of us. Brothers, time to make a name for ourselves!”

Xiuchun sabers slid from their sheaths as their booming laughter reverberated up through the clouds. Blood spattered across the stairs as more than a dozen of the Embroidered Uniform Guard climbed over the railings and brandished their blades to cut down the Biansha Horsemen swarming toward them with gathering force. Heads rolled down the cramped, narrow stairs. With every rise and fall of his blade, Fei Sheng targeted his opponents’ necks without the slightest hesitation.

Lei Jingzhe didn’t dare set fire to the building. He wanted to capture Yan Heru alive, so his only option was to force his way up the stairs. But the Embroidered Uniform Guard were all in flawless form tonight. Those Scorpions, unshakable when they were out in the open, couldn’t swing their hammers freely on the stairs; this greatly reduced the strain on the defending Embroidered Uniform Guard. Unable to ascend, Lei Jingzhe sought another way. Fuxian Peak towered over the double-eaved roofs below like a crane standing head-and-shoulders above a flock of chickens. He called for the cloud ladder, unfolding the long ladder from the base cart of the siege engine until it touched the roof.

Yan Heru watched as the Biansha Horsemen swarmed toward them. Fuxian Peak was like a lone pillar abandoned between heaven and earth. He

retreated to Shen Zechuan's side, shivering from the wind. "Okay, there's no way you entered the tiger's den without a plan."

Shen Zechuan didn't answer. Yan Heru was about to say more when a hand grasped the railing beside him, and a Biansha Horseman heaved his way up. Without thinking, Yan Heru raised his golden abacus and slammed it down on the man's head, knocking him out. But there were more men close behind, and they grabbed Yan Heru's abacus and held it in place before hoisting themselves up.

Yan Heru lived by the maxim that as valuable as gold might be, life was more precious still—he promptly let go, abandoning the abacus. He scrambled several steps back before tripping over the small table and falling to the ground. His attacker was a tall, strapping man, and he looked like a mountain when he stood before Yan Heru. Seeing him lift his blade, Yan Heru screamed, "Your Lordship, save me! My dear gege, the price can be negotiated!"

A saker falcon swooped past. Before the cavalryman could bring the blade down, a figure materialized behind him. Haerigu leapt through the air, cutting the man down in one slash. He rolled as he landed and grabbed hold of Yan Heru.

Yan Heru lifted his head, intending to lay into Shen Zechuan for being so petty. Yet before he could open his mouth, a black shadow sprang over the railing and landed heavily atop the rail. Haerigu pressed Yan Heru's head down and bent backward to dodge the iron hammer swinging toward them.

The man's bare upper body was just as muscular as Jida's, whom they had so recently encountered. The iron hammer tore through the air. When Yan Heru straightened, he had to crane his neck back to look at his attacker. The scorpion tattoo crawled over his entire bare back. The man rolled his shoulders, then jumped down onto the platform.

Haerigu pushed Yan Heru aside and drew the pike dagger from the back of his belt. The two fighters wasted no time on greetings as they launched into a flurry of blows.

Yan Heru was left exposed in the chaos. He was used to a life of luxury, and what martial arts he had learned in his youth were all show and no substance. In any case, he had forgotten all of it. Fearing the sharp beaks of the saker falcons overhead, Yan Heru crouched low and crawled away on all fours through any opening he could find in the mayhem. At last he managed to make his way to the edge of the fray, only to find a familiar figure squatting on the railing.

Yan Heru lifted his gaze, his eyes curving into crescents as he smiled and called warmly, “Nephew!”

Lei Jingzhe sneered and lunged out to grab him.

Heedless of dignity or reputation, Yan Heru hit the ground and rolled away like a slippery loach. He had reached for the railing to haul himself upright when he felt a grip on his collar. Thinking it was Lei Jingzhe, he whipped his head around to plead, “Lei-gege—”

But the face he saw was Shen Zechuan’s.

Shen Zechuan yanked Yan Heru off the railing left-handed and tossed him to the ground. Before Yan Heru could slither away again, Shen Zechuan planted a foot on Yan Heru’s back to make him kneel. Yan Heru was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He wanted to cry as he knelt between both men, but no tears came—instead, he put his palms together and said as though praying, “I was just playing around with my two dear gege. My loss this time; I’ll pay you back! Let’s put all the swords away, okay?! Say, the three of us should join forces—then we’d be invincible, don’t you think?!”

Lei Jingzhe gestured sharply for Yan Heru to shut up. He leapt off the railing, eyes pinned on Shen Zechuan as he sauntered over. After a moment, he asked, “How have you been, Vice Commander?” He came to a stop, and without waiting for Shen Zechuan to answer, continued, “Guess I should call you *Prefectural Governor* now.”

All around them was the commotion of battle, and the sounds of smashing tables and chairs resounded in their ears. Thick, gloomy clouds hung low overhead as the two men stood in the gale, confronting each other

with Yan Heru between them. The raging wind surged and receded against the twinkling backdrop of the thousands of lights of Dunzhou.

Lei Jingzhe rubbed the back of his neck and said mockingly, “I have excellent luck tonight. To think I caught such a big fish in this sewer. What, no Xiao Chiye to protect you this time?”

Shen Zechuan raised a finger to nudge his cloak off his shoulder and inclined his head with a smile. “My husband is up to his neck in military affairs. He has no time for long journeys these days. Any pressing matters can be discussed amongst ourselves.”

Lei Jingzhe’s eyes gradually darkened to conceal the sly glint within. “Did you come to Dunzhou—ah, forgive me. Did you come *back* to Dunzhou to hold a memorial service for Shen Wei?”

“I’m here on Young Master Yan’s invitation,” Shen Zechuan said without batting an eye, “to discuss a plan to kill you.”

Yan Heru blanched. He wanted to explain himself—*defend* himself—but when he met Lei Jingzhe’s gaze, a chill went down his spine and he didn’t dare speak. Shen Zechuan was truly ruthless. With just one sentence, he had severed Yan Heru’s route of retreat. Whether or not Yan Heru survived the night, Lei Jingzhe would never believe him again.

“I did sense that the one who saved Yan Heru back at the restaurant was a man of no ordinary talent—no wonder.” The look in Lei Jingzhe’s eyes was menacing. “I had intended to be magnanimous and not lower myself to the level of a child, but I never expected him to be so vicious as to invite you over so you could scheme to kill me.”

“He’s a boy at heart.” Shen Zechuan removed his foot from Yan Heru’s back. “He doesn’t know when to stop and ended up angering you. I’m afraid it’s rather embarrassing.”

“So you’ve been colluding for a long time.” As expected, Lei Jingzhe took the bait. “No wonder I couldn’t find the supply wagons.”

“But you outdid him tonight,” Shen Zechuan said ruefully, as if conceding defeat. His eyes followed Lei Jingzhe. “Seeing as it’s my own life at risk now, I could certainly consider switching allegiances.”

Lei Jingzhe feared Shen Zechuan, who was all too proficient at these sorts of mind games. The moment he fell for Shen Zechuan's words, he would be irrevocably doomed. Lei Jingzhe lowered his arm and sneered. "Xiao Chiye destroyed my base on Mount Luo. This is a score that must be settled."

"If you kill Yan Heru tonight, you'll be severing all ties to Hezhou. But if you wish to continue occupying both Dunzhou and Duanzhou, you'll have to sustain the military provisions and expenses somehow." Shen Zechuan added, coaxing, "Cizhou's granaries currently overflow with grain. I can lend you a hand."

Lei Jingzhe threw his head back and roared with laughter. "If you've been colluding with Yan Heru, then you must have seen Haerigu. You came to Dunzhou this time hoping to leverage Bai Cha's name to take in these traitors, right?!"

"It seems the game is as good as lost for me tonight. Even this I can't hide from you." Shen Zechuan sighed with regret. "That's right. I came here for precisely this reason. Lei Jingzhe, we are all sons of Gedal. When it comes down to it, we, too, are brothers. So why point our blades at each other?"

"Hack off Xiao Chiye's head, and we can be brothers." Lei Jingzhe bore a bitter grudge against Xiao Chiye. He said in frosty tones, "You're only speaking so prettily now because you see how heavily besieged the city is. You know you can't escape death."

"Are you really going to kill me?"

"Letting an enemy walk free is like letting a tiger return to its mountain—it only sets the stage for future trouble," Lei Jingzhe said. "It took you two months to devour Cizhou and Chazhou and take Zhou Gui and Luo Mu under your command. I worried you would become the dominant power in Zhongbo in no time, stronger the longer you lived—and that by then, it would be too hard to remove you. I didn't expect you to deliver yourself to my doorstep. No matter how you ply that silver tongue of yours, you'll die by my hand tonight!"

The wind caught in Shen Zechuan’s sleeves, setting them billowing and revealing the delicate bones of his wrists. The bandage on his right hand was stark against the blue handkerchief gripped between his fingers. He covered his mouth and coughed as though he couldn’t bear the cold on this tower. When he caught his breath, he said, “For the sake of Bai Cha, can’t you let me go this time?”

Realization hit Lei Jingzhe the instant the words left his mouth. “You deceived me!” he bellowed. “You don’t know anything about the Scorpions!”

His fist swung toward Shen Zechuan’s face. Already on guard, Shen Zechuan slid aside to dodge. But instead of retracting his fist after missing his target, Lei Jingzhe used his momentum to grab for Shen Zechuan’s arm. White robes fluttered in the wind as Shen Zechuan again slipped out of reach with elegant grace, leaving Lei Jingzhe grasping at air. Lei Jingzhe crouched and swept his leg in a wide arc, and Shen Zechuan sprang back, dancing away from the wind stirred by the kick and alighting on the railing.

Below them, the sounds of killing boiled over like a seething cauldron. Lei Jingzhe was determined to send Shen Zechuan to his death tonight. Seeing him balanced perilously on the railing edge, Lei Jingzhe grabbed his hammer and swung it into the gale, attempting to knock Shen Zechuan over the side. Shen Zechuan steadied himself on the railing. The wind roared behind him, setting his sleeves flaring like the wings of a swan goose. His right hand remained still; he had begun this fight at a disadvantage.

Aiming to rattle him, Lei Jingzhe spoke as he moved: “Well, then! Shen Zechuan, don’t you want to know what Bai Cha was to the Scorpions? I’ll tell you tonight!”

He soared into the air and landed on the railing as well, matching his every step as he attempted to crowd Shen Zechuan toward the edge. “Bai Cha was a Duanzhou brothel whore who worked for the Liaoying tribe. She was a dog Amur planted beside Shen Wei—the needle Biansha hid in Zhongbo!”

Shen Zechuan seemed to lose his balance as he teetered on the edge of the rail. His sleeves fluttered out over the drop, and Fei Sheng, catching sight of him from deep within the horde of people, felt his heart leap into his throat. “Master!”

Yet in the next moment, Shen Zechuan braced himself against the wind and swayed forward to stabilize himself.

Lei Jingzhe struck out, forcing Shen Zechuan to skip back to evade his blows. “Don’t you find yourself wretched? Being born Shen Wei’s son caused you so much suffering! Let me pull you out of this abyss of misery. Shen Zechuan, you’re a bastard child of Biansha. In Gedal, Bai Cha was a cheap whore—”

A blow struck the side of Lei Jingzhe’s neck with such force he nearly bit off his tongue. He lurched a few steps back and steadied himself on that high railing, then turned and spat blood off the tower from the strike Shen Zechuan had dealt him.

Shen Zechuan had his left hand lifted in a ready stance, his eyes like chips of ice. His face looked particularly pale under the tenuous veil of moonlight, as if he was a cold piece of jade, devoid of blood. Slowly, he said, “Watch your tongue.”

Lei Jingzhe threw his hammer aside and stepped back again, putting more distance between them. “Every word I speak is the truth.” He continued in a low voice, his gaze almost sympathetic. “You truly are the world’s most pitiful child. Do you know how Bai Cha died? When Shen Wei found out who she was working for, he strangled her to death with his bare hands. You’re a child born from mutual abhorrence. Why would Shen Wei raise you? When you crawled your way out of the Chashi Sinkhole and returned to Zhongbo after experiencing all that hatred and sorrow, did you think you were taking back your homeland?” He laughed and said cruelly, “You must’ve thought it so incredibly touching—but you didn’t expect this, did you? No one will accept you for what you are. If Libei finds out what Bai Cha was, Xiao Chiye’s blade will turn on you in an instant.”

A jolt vibrated through the railing. The moment Shen Zechuan kicked out, Lei Jingzhe crossed his arms before him to block the blow, back

bending from the impact. Watching them locked in fierce combat, Yan Heru didn’t dare remain so close and scurried to the other end of the platform. Lei Jingzhe could barely fend off Shen Zechuan’s attacks. As he jumped back to evade, he scraped against a wooden garden lattice, knocking it into the glazed lamps nearby. Hungry flames pounced onto the rich woolen carpet, setting it ablaze in the blink of an eye.

Lei Jingzhe was sure Shen Zechuan had lost his last measure of control. As they struggled on the railing, the flames behind them roared higher.

Bathed in blood from the battle, Fei Sheng leapt out of the crowded stairway and shouted, “Master, the tower’s on fire. We have to go!”

Lei Jingzhe felt a gust of wind at his back and used what remained of his strength to dodge the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s blades. “Dunzhou will become mine tonight. Fight all you want; you won’t leave here alive!”

He was still shouting when those white sleeves rushed toward him in a move so sudden he stumbled back. Shen Zechuan grabbed Lei Jingzhe by the collar. In that heart-stopping moment, Lei Jingzhe got a clear look at Shen Zechuan’s face. Before even Fei Sheng could react, there was the sound of fabric tearing, and in a flash, a swanlike white figure plunged over the side of the railing with Lei Jingzhe.

Fei Sheng was mad with terror as he grabbed for them with a lightning-quick reach, but his hand merely brushed the hem of Lei Jingzhe’s clothes. Panic-stricken, he cried in a cracking voice, “Master!”

The instant Lei Jingzhe went over the edge, he realized Shen Zechuan was gambling his life to kill him. His hand shot out, grasping at air to stop his fall as his back slammed into the upturned eaves of Fuxian Peak. When a corner of the eaves broke off under him, he grabbed onto the jagged ledge and hung on, feet kicking in the empty air. The blazing flames looked like they were engulfing the world, and despite himself, Lei Jingzhe broke out in a sweat. He didn’t dare hesitate; hand already burning with pain, he attempted to swing himself up over the damaged eaves and onto the protruding tiles.

But Shen Zechuan had already climbed up from the other side. He stomped on Lei Jingzhe's raised hand, and several tiles tumbled off and smashed to pieces on the ground far below.

Shaken, Lei Jingzhe spat blood into the wind. "Fuck!"

Shen Zechuan looked down at Lei Jingzhe, his tattered sleeves revealing his bandaged right hand, silhouetted by the towering flames behind him. He removed the bandage and tossed aside the steel brace secured with it, then clenched his five pale fingers into a fist to test his strength.

Lei Jingzhe's fingers ached from the stomping. He had pulled a muscle in his arm earlier, and right now, he was hanging on for dear life, his feet stepping on empty air. As he clung to the crumbling eaves with all his might, he saw that steel brace tumble down before his eyes.

"Even if you kill me here, you won't survive this." Lei Jingzhe looked up and squeezed out a laugh. "You're *pitiful*. You've been molded in —into a monster! After tonight, Zhongbo will become your nightmare. You'll toss and turn night after night; you'll be on tenterhooks day after day. The land beneath your feet—"

Shen Zechuan crouched down. The red light of the flames swept away all his gloomy pallor, replacing it with an alluring and bloodthirsty ruthlessness. He laughed softly. "How very naive."

Lei Jingzhe's throat bobbed; he didn't understand how Shen Zechuan could—

A strained gasp escaped him as Shen Zechuan's right hand shot out and clutched his throat. Never had he imagined the seemingly frail and sickly Shen Zechuan would have such strength.

Shen Zechuan tightened his grip, using Lei Jingzhe's momentum as he tried to push himself up to haul him closer. As he watched Lei Jingzhe's face flush red, he said, low-voiced, "Lei Jingzhe, you must be joking. Did you really think the truth about Bai Cha would sway me?"

Unable to breathe, Lei Jingzhe's eyes darted back and forth as fear swallowed him up.

Shen Zechuan scrutinized him and explained kindly, “I came to Dunzhou for the specific purpose of capturing you.”

Lei Jingzhe’s throat spasmed.

“In fact, you’ve done me a great favor.” Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze to look over Dunzhou. “I wanted both Dunzhou and Duanzhou, but I couldn’t make a move for fear of Qi Zhuyin. I had to use King Yi of Fanzhou as a shield. You could have lived a little longer—if you hadn’t brought the men you did this time, I might have had to wait a year, two years, even longer for the right opportunity. But you brought the Biansha Horsemen.”

Behind them, sparks crackled and sputtered.

“Now I have good reason to deploy troops to Dunzhou.” Shen Zechuan swung his gaze back to Lei Jingzhe’s face. “Thank you for chatting with me so long, so I could buy time for the Cizhou Garrison Troops.”

Lei Jingzhe looked up at him in disbelief. How could Shen Zechuan have predicted his moves with such precision? He’d anticipated every step Lei Jingzhe would take! He raised his head, the world before him already a blur, and gasped, “You, you S-Scorpion…”

“It doesn’t matter who my parents are.” Shen Zechuan leaned in and whispered into his ear, “I am Shen Zechuan. Whether what you said is the truth or a lie makes no difference to me at all. I am my own nightmare.”

What land beneath his feet?

Zhongbo couldn’t tie Shen Zechuan down. He was not nearly as attached to his roots as Xiao Chiye was. Since the day he fell into the Chashi Sinkhole, he’d become a man without a home. He had severed whatever attachment he had toward this land. He could never gallop under the sunlight in the grasslands; his wings were born from the darkness of night. If Xiao Chiye was the Hongyan Mountains, then Shen Zechuan was the frigid wind coursing through the hills and valleys of Zhongbo.

Shen Wei. Bai Cha.

He didn’t care about them in the least.

The two fingers on his right hand made a bone-breaking noise of protest, but Shen Zechuan could no longer feel the pain. He gripped Lei Jingzhe's throat just as he had Ji Lei's, one year ago. This brutal, familiar move told himself as much as anyone else that he was no longer trapped under the control of others. Perhaps Lei Jingzhe was right: All those years of suffering and hatred had molded him into a monster. The night Qi Huilian had died in that heavy downpour, Shen Zechuan had forsaken all the obsolete conventions and constrictions that bound him. He would no longer be anyone's prisoner.

He loved Xiao Chiye, and he still had Ji Gang. He couldn't imagine a day when Xiao Chiye and Ji Gang would become a thing of the past, transformed into a pain he had no remedy for. He had had enough of enduring in silence; he was sick of being chained. He desired not merely to tear apart the world, but every shackle the past had ever imposed on him.

Lei Jingzhe felt his grip weakening. Summoning the last of his strength, he lurched up to grab Shen Zechuan's arm, and it was at this moment he remembered the rumors out of Qudu.

"Mad. Mad…" Lei Jingzhe squeezed the words out.

The angry flames stretched upward like a fiery dragon, roaring along the double-eaved roofs of the tower. The building let out a series of dangerous shrieks. Wood buckled with a thunderous *crash*, and the tiles below their feet shattered and slid off. Fuxian Peak, the soaring pavilion Yan Heru had spent a fortune constructing, was on the verge of collapse. The damaged eaves cracked and split, as if the roof could no longer bear their weight.

Shen Zechuan stood amid this chaos, yet all he saw was the abyss in his dream. He had stood so long at the brink of that abyss without taking the final step forward. He didn't know what kind of change that final step would bring. Distantly, he heard the thunder of hooves.

It was the wind of Libei.

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Shen Zechuan let go. As the eaves collapsed, Shen Zechuan took a step forward into empty air. His white robe fluttered as he plunged down like a bird with its wings folded. The wind swept past his ears. He felt as if he was in a dream.

Still, stagnant waters lay at the bottom of the abyss, and it was into these Shen Zechuan fell, stirring up ripples as he landed. But the sound of breathing in his ear was so, so intense. A vital force dispelled the darkness as strong arms wrapped around him. In that split second, the lifeless waters seemed to brush off their extraneous dust and take new shape, becoming a familiar chest, a beloved embrace.

Xiao Chiye had caught him.

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Chapter 175:
Kitten

FUXIAN PEAK was collapsing. When Xiao Chiye looked up, his soul nearly took leave of his body. He grabbed hold of the eaves with one hand and stepped on someone's head to clamber up the double-eaved roof, then ran as fast as his life was worth. He caught Shen Zechuan in his arms in a flying leap, the impact knocking him off course. Xiao Chiye immediately curled around Shen Zechuan to shield him as his back struck the roof ridge, sending more tiles toppling off.

Chen Yang reined in his horse and pointed his whip toward the roof. "Lao-Hu, get them!"

Xiao Chiye panted heavily and pushed himself up on sore arms. Sweat trickled along his neck. As falling beams and tiles went crashing past them, he brushed the hair on Shen Zechuan's cheek aside with trembling fingers and verified that Shen Zechuan was still breathing weakly. He bit out a muffled curse and held Shen Zechuan so tightly he coughed amid the smoke and dust.

Tantai Hu had followed close behind Xiao Chiye all the way to the base of the tower. Now he released Snowcrest's reins and shouted, "Master!"

Xiao Chiye stepped over the tiles and leapt down. Gu Jin reached out to help, but Xiao Chiye raised an arm to block him, unwilling to hand Shen Zechuan over to anyone. After mounting his horse, Xiao Chiye took his cloak from Chen Yang and covered Shen Zechuan with it.

The contours of Xiao Chiye's profile were cold and hard. He patted Tantai Hu on the back with his free hand, making Tantai Hu straighten up, then said flatly, "This was your elder brother's battlefield."

Tantai Hu wiped at the blood on his cheek in silence.

Eyes grave and solemn, Xiao Chiye said, "Tantai Hu, time to go home."

The Prince of Jianxing's manor was once again burning, about to be razed to the ground. The crackle of flames accompanied the sounds of slaughter as the fire blazed until dawn. The darkening blood on the downtown streets of Dunzhou had converged into a trickling stream. All this while, the commoners had hidden themselves in their homes, not daring to peek through the windows. In the morning, the Cizhou Garrison Troops and Imperial Army began to clean up the site of the battle, dragging the corpses to an open, flat area to be disposed of at a later time.

Tantai Hu, having just returned from the remains of the manor, was presently having his meal. Without even stopping to wash his face, he squatted beside the guards on the veranda to wolf down his food. Chen Yang had called for the chef from one of the Yan Clan's pleasure houses to prepare meals for the soldiers; they were famished after marching through the night and fighting until the break of day.

"Street fights really are the most satisfying." Tantai Hu wiped his mouth. "Field operations are satisfying, too, but not nearly as thrilling."

"Master had the foresight"—Gu Jin bit into a steamed bun before continuing—"to avoid equipping the Imperial Army with armor. Otherwise, we would've gotten the worst of those hammers last night."

The curtains in the main hall remained down while their masters rested inside. Chen Yang couldn't help but fret. Clutching at the register of names, he questioned Ding Tao: "How could you let Gongzi go up that tower? Why weren't you with him?"

Ding Tao hung his head, not daring to speak. Fei Sheng and several others had hastily bandaged their wounds, and their upper garments hung open as they knelt in the courtyard and waited for their reprimand. Even so, the Embroidered Uniform Guard had put up a beautiful defense last night. Lei Jingzhe's troops had never made it up the stairs. Two of their own had died, but it was as Fei Sheng had proclaimed: They had made a name for themselves with this battle. No one could belittle them in the future. They had real capabilities and could hold their heads high even before the guards from Libei, for they were no less ferocious.

Kong Ling stood in the hall and waited deferentially off to one side. Hearing the light clinks of porcelain within, he knew Xiao Chiye was feeding Shen Zechuan medicine. After a spell, the maidservant came out with the empty bowl and curtsied to Kong Ling before leaving the room.

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and stepped out. Wiping his hands with a handkerchief, he said to Kong Ling, “It’s nothing serious. He hurt his hand. Last time it was his left hand and now it’s his right—at least he’s taking turns to injure them. He’ll be the death of me someday.”

Kong Ling remained unruffled as he listened with his head lowered; he knew these words were not meant for him. The inner chamber was not soundproof; Xiao Chiye’s offhanded tone made the man lying within turn over soundlessly in his bed.

Xiao Chiye set the handkerchief down, then stepped aside and gestured for Kong Ling to enter. Once Kong Ling lifted the curtains and went in, Xiao Chiye strode out the door to stand under the eaves, whistling to the guards.

“Tell Gu Jin to dispose of the corpses by tonight at the latest. Get any cleaning supplies you need from the Yan Clan.” Xiao Chiye cast a glance at the sky. “I noticed last night all the public ditches in Dunzhou are clogged. The weather’s cooler in autumn, but it’s still too easy for an epidemic to start if there’s standing water. Keep an eye on it.”

Dunzhou had no prefectural yamen to manage its affairs, and its network of public ditches was a neglected mess. Plenty of people had built their houses over the ditches, and the blockage was far worse than it’d been in Qudu. This was the reason blood had pooled into puddles on the streets this morning. Autumn was not as hot as summer, but it was dry. Last night, the fire had spread so far partially because the houses in the residential district were all clustered together, eaves against eaves.

While Xiao Chiye stood in the doorway giving instructions, Shen Zechuan was discussing official business with Kong Ling in the inner chamber.

Kong Ling sat on the small chair beside the bed. “As soon as Cizhou received the governor’s letter, we started preparing the garrison troops.

Yuanzhuo wanted them to leave the city immediately and head east to wait for the Imperial Army at the boundary just below Border Camp. He said if the Imperial Army came, they could head south together. If not, they should remain there and wait." At this point, he smiled. "I initially objected because Your Lordship had instructed us in your letter not to act without orders. It's a good thing Yuanzhuo insisted."

Shen Zechuan reclined against the pillow and read the letter Kong Ling had brought. "Yuanzhuo understood my intent."

Too injured to write, Shen Zechuan had been forced to dictate his letters on the road. At the time, there had been captured bandits lingering around the carriage, many of them former subordinates of Liu'er, who had himself been Lei Jingzhe's messenger. Shen Zechuan couldn't trust any of these people. Thus when he had dictated his command to Cizhou, he had said, *Do not act without orders*, then followed it immediately with the order to head for Dunzhou. He had been playing with words here, and Yao Wenyu had seen his aim instantly.

"The governor is circumspect and farsighted," said Kong Ling. "When Cizhou's advisors were discussing Dunzhou a few days back, we had assumed we wouldn't come until after spring next year. Who would have expected Your Lordship to have already devised such a strategy?" Kong Ling said.

"It was a coincidence this time." Shen Zechuan was clear-headed. "When I seized those supply wagons, all I knew was that there were four hundred Scorpions hiding in Dunzhou. I gave Cizhou a hint to deploy troops because I hoped to use this as an excuse to let the garrison draw out what was hiding in Dunzhou. It would have been enough to capture Lei Jingzhe alive. I had no idea he would bring more than ten thousand Horsemen and deliver them right into my hands."

During their discussion back in Cizhou, they had agreed to prioritize containing King Yi's small imperial court in Fanzhou before attempting to obtain Dunzhou. This was because King Yi was a useful barrier between Qi Zhuyin of Qidong and their territories. Shen Zechuan now held Cizhou and Chazhou, and would be relying on the nascent trade route for his rise to power. But in Zhongbo, he was still only the master of a small corner. The

prefectures of Dunzhou, Duanzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou to the east all had their own masters. If Shen Zechuan wanted to remove these local despots from the equation, he needed a plausible excuse to move against them. Otherwise, he would give Qi Zhuyin sufficient justification to launch an assault on him the moment he made a move.

Lei Jingzhe had most certainly not expected this; he had come for the sole purpose of eliminating Haerigu, only to end up providing the perfect excuse for Shen Zechuan to capture Dunzhou. But seen from another angle, Lei Jingzhe's gambit here illustrated something else: Lei Jingzhe had been in Duanzhou so long he had forgotten Zhongbo was still land that was part of Great Zhou. He had brazenly led ten thousand cavalrymen deep into Dunzhou. He'd thought nothing of King Yi of Fanzhou and Dengzhou, and even less of Shen Zechuan of Cizhou.

Kong Ling still had more to report, but he paused when he heard the wind starting to rise outside the window. In no time at all, it had started to drizzle. He hurriedly rose and closed the windows for Shen Zechuan before continuing. "This trip has been too dangerous for the governor. There are some words that should more properly be conveyed to you by Yuanzhuo himself, but it's inconvenient for him to travel long distances, so I shall be so bold as to speak them on his behalf."

Shen Zechuan seemed to anticipate what Kong Ling was going to say. He set the letter down on the blanket and gave him his full attention.

Kong Ling took two steps forward. "As they say, a wise man does not put himself in harm's way. For Your Lordship to repeatedly place yourself in danger is simply not appropriate. The reconstruction of Cizhou is still in its infancy, and the registration of Chazhou's citizens has not yet been completed. Libei's trade market, too, has yet to begin. The governor is the head of this household. By taking such risks, you are making all the loyal men behind you worry."

His point could not be any clearer: Now that Shen Zechuan was the prefectural governor, he held in his hands the lifeblood of Cizhou and Chazhou, and brought with him the tiger that was Libei, crouching behind him. It was not enough to simply embark on a great undertaking; one must see it through. There would be many affairs in the future on which he would

hold sole decision-making power. They could not afford for anything to happen to him.

Shen Zechuan's countenance was pleasant as he inclined his head toward Kong Ling. "The gentleman is right to lecture me. I will sincerely reflect on your words and take no more unnecessary risks."

After Kong Ling had taken his leave, Shen Zechuan folded the letter and placed it on the small table at the head of the bed. His right hand had been bandaged again. His two fingers had been bent out of alignment from the pressure he had inflicted on them, and when the physician had set them again earlier, Shen Zechuan had sweated with pain. Even now, they still ached.

Outside, it was pouring, as though the rain had come to cleanse the streets on behalf of Dunzhou. There were many matters to which Shen Zechuan had yet to attend, but he didn't move from where he'd leaned back against the pillow. He didn't wish to see anyone save Xiao Chiye, but Xiao Chiye did not return, though he waited for over an hour. Eventually, he drifted off to sleep.

When he next woke, it was due to the heat. He found he'd been shifted more comfortably down into the bed. The sky was murky and bleak, filled with the urgent howls of wind and rain. He cocked his head to see Xiao Chiye sitting at the edge of the bed, reading the letter Shen Zechuan had left on the table by candlelight.

The moment he saw him, Shen Zechuan started to ache all over. Having just woken up, he was too lazy to move, so he clung dazedly to the pillow. His foot under the blanket slid over to make light contact with Xiao Chiye's calf.

Xiao Chiye ignored him.

Shen Zechuan pushed himself up to sitting and peered over at the letter, then explained in a hoarse voice, "It's from Yuanzhuo. I need to reply to him so he can get Gao Zhongxiong to write a statement immediately. We have to make it clear to Qidong that Cizhou deployed troops here to fight the Biansha Horsemen."

Xiao Chiye looked at him sidelong, then folded the letter and tossed it aside. He said nothing.

Shen Zechuan took this chance to lie on Xiao Chiye's arm and bury his head there. "Ce'an."

"I'll return to Cizhou with you in a few days." Xiao Chiye finally lowered his eyes to look at Shen Zechuan. "Let's see: You broke your fingers and you jumped off a building. Ji Gang-shifu is going to have to lash me until the horsewhip breaks."

"Don't," Shen Zechuan said, voice muffled.

Xiao Chiye fell silent.

Shen Zechuan nuzzled his face against Xiao Chiye's arm and murmured, "A-Ye."

Xiao Chiye felt Shen Zechuan truly deserved to be chastised this time. He was determined not to fall for sweet talk, so he used his free hand to grab the back of Shen Zechuan's collar and lift him off his arm. "Who's A-Ye? No such person."

"Er—"

Xiao Chiye covered Shen Zechuan with the blanket and blew out the candle. Without touching him, he turned his back and lay down, fully clothed. He could still feel the panic of sprinting to catch Shen Zechuan as he fell. He'd run with everything he had, as though his own life depended on it. Even had there been a mountain of swords or a sea of flames before him, he wouldn't have given them a second glance. He was already about to die from the wounds Shen Zechuan was dealing to his heart.

Shen Zechuan peeled off the blanket and nudged Xiao Chiye's back, then slowly made his way up to lean on his shoulder and put his brow against his temple. "I can't fall asleep if you aren't holding me."

Xiao Chiye lay down flat and grabbed Shen Zechuan around the waist to drag him onto his body, then held him aloft. Shen Zechuan looked at him, and he looked back at Shen Zechuan. Xiao Chiye's grip was like iron; Shen Zechuan couldn't move.

"So go ahead and sleep." Xiao Chiye said.

“This is a little uncomfortable.” Shen Zechuan glanced down at himself. “It’s hard to hold this position.”

“Is it?” Xiao Chiye said with the shadow of a smile. “I’ve been holding my breath with worry all this time.”

Shen Zechuan laid his palm on Xiao Chiye’s chest and rubbed it.

Xiao Chiye lifted him to arm’s length. “No touching. I’m angry.”

Shen Zechuan was like a downtrodden cat, Xiao Chiye holding him up while Shen Zechuan brandished his paws to scratch teasingly at Xiao Chiye’s chest. Light and ticklish, devilish and terribly pampered—those scratches made Xiao Chiye’s teeth itch. It was clear from those expressive, languid eyes: This man was planning to boldly act as if none of what had happened was his own fault, sure he could get away with it.

Though Xiao Chiye was still miffed, the drag of those fingers slowly wore his anger down to nothing. The way Shen Zechuan looked and acted now was a sight for his eyes only, the outcome of being utterly indulged and spoiled in Xiao Chiye’s arms. Xiao Chiye knew this, but he didn’t intend to let Shen Zechuan’s indiscretions go unpunished.

“Are you brushing the dust off me?” Xiao Chiye asked mercilessly. “It’s been two days since I last bathed.”

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Chapter 176:
Breaking Waves

XIAO CHIYE had ridden south from Border Camp to join the Cizhou garrison troops at the boundary of Libei. Instead of continuing south, he had chosen the same route as Shen Zechuan and made a detour west of Dunzhou. The troops could only march at night to avoid the eyes of King Yi of Fanzhou, but fortunately, he had made it in the nick of time.

Shen Zechuan leaned over to sniff Xiao Chiye.

Refusing to indulge him, Xiao Chiye tried to lift him away again. Shen Zechuan clutched at the front of his clothes in retaliation. Xiao Chiye was painfully conscious of Shen Zechuan's bandaged right hand and worried he would worsen the injury if he exerted any force. He had no choice but to lower Shen Zechuan back down and let him sniff to his heart's content.

"It's been two days since I bathed too." Shen Zechuan pressed a knee against Xiao Chiye and sank into the bedding to drape himself over him. "Let's bathe together."

Rain pattered on the eaves, as if scouring the roof with countless tiny brushes. Xiao Chiye lay back to offer his chest to Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan settled on it. His loosened collar gave him an air of languor. Every inch of his skin sought Xiao Chiye. He was deliberately relaxed, as if the sensuality oozing from him was unintentional, and all of his expressions were innocent.

Shen Zechuan had the ability to turn his every exhalation into soft murmurs. In Xiao Chiye's eyes, he was a natural beauty. Those eyes of his skimmed over Xiao Chiye's heart the same way his warm fingertips grazed the surface of the lake in Xiao Chiye's soul, stirring up a trail of ripples. There were moments in bed when he would plead; when he could no longer bear it, he would tearfully call out every one of Xiao Chiye's names, yet even the way he begged was intoxicating.

They had always been naturally in sync with one another, with the ability to read each slight moan and whimper that passed between them. The unparalleled ecstasy they shared derived from the way they fit so perfectly together. If Xiao Chiye wanted to hold his ground against a lover like this, he had to be a wall, one that could stand firm against all oncoming waves.

“Sure.” Xiao Chiye’s tone shifted as he said flippantly, “I’ll bathe with you.”

Shen Zechuan found the look in those eyes slightly ominous.

Dunzhou was located far to the east, where the days grew cold quickly in autumn. The bathhouses within Tianji Courtyard were unlike those in Qudu with windows; instead, they were sturdily built, fully enclosed rooms. Inside, the bathing facilities were not only comprehensive, but varied and fanciful. Warm, humid mist assailed the bather the moment the door opened and the bamboo blinds came up.

Even before Shen Zechuan had been completely stripped of his clothes, he was soaking in the water. Under the pretense of keeping his wound dry, Xiao Chiye had bound both his wrists with a waist sash and conveniently hung them up on a small rack beside the pool. He had even selected a tiny golden bell from the wicker basket for Shen Zechuan, which he tied to Shen Zechuan’s bonds. Whenever Shen Zechuan moved, the bell rang, crisp and clear.

Shen Zechuan’s clothes were soaked through. He found the heat in the bathhouse unbearable, but at the moment, he was too preoccupied to care. The tips of his ears had gone crimson, making a stark contrast with the jade earring, which seemed particularly pale and delicate in comparison. Xiao Chiye crouched down before him, bare-chested, and hoisted Shen Zechuan’s legs onto his shoulders.

“Since you can’t seem to remember a word I say,” Xiao Chiye said, wiping a small blade clean with a handkerchief. “I’ll have to drill it into you with a lesson.”

Shen Zechuan’s toes curled as he called out, eyes shut. “Xiao Ce’an!”

“Hm?” Xiao Chiye’s attention was on his hands. “Who are you calling for?”

The chill of the blade against his skin jolted Shen Zechuan into opening his eyes. Shame burned in them. “I hate you to death!”

Xiao Chiye flicked him a glance. “I hate you to death too.”

Feeling the friction of the small blade as it scraped over him, Shen Zechuan trembled. The water was hot while the blade was cool, and the sensation of that coolness traversing every inch of him was agonizingly distinct and clear. He couldn’t bear it, and he couldn’t bring himself to look down. He looked nowhere but at Xiao Chiye.

This gaze was truly too pitiful. This was the first time Xiao Chiye had ever seen it, and he had the urge to grab a brush and capture the moment in ink and paper without delay. He had still been upset even as he got into the water, but now he started to laugh. Xiao Chiye had never done anything like this before. It was his first time, so his hands were careful as he shaved all the areas he ought until not a hair was left.

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Shen Zechuan's back was still pressed to the wall of the pool, and these vastly disparate sensations drained him of his entire life's worth of composure. He was genuinely in Xiao Chiye's hands now, and he didn't dare move an inch. Their surroundings were brightly illuminated as he panted into the thick mist. Condensation clung to the jade earring, gleaming with each rise and fall of his chest. Shen Zechuan seemed to have become Xiao Chiye's very own jade, polished until not a speck of privacy remained.

"Still going to stab me in the heart next time?" Xiao Chiye asked.

Shen Zechuan made no answer.

Xiao Chiye looked up when he was done and discovered Shen Zechuan's eyes were red through and through. He couldn't tell if he had teared up from the steam or exasperation. Xiao Chiye's heart didn't soften a whit. He pinched Shen Zechuan's cheek and proclaimed ruthlessly, "Each time you get injured, I'll shave you again."

Shen Zechuan felt much too cool down there. His eyes brimmed with tears, and the redness that had started at the tips of his ears spread down to his chest. Before he could catch his breath, Xiao Chiye had pinned him against the wall of the pool and kissed him until the bell swung wildly.

The rain was still falling the next day. Shen Zechuan had gotten a rare good night's sleep.

When Xiao Chiye dressed and slipped on wooden clogs to leave the inner chamber, Chen Yang was waiting under the eaves. Instead of discussing work here, Xiao Chiye stepped out onto the walkway and made his way to a room a little distance away.

Following him in, Chen Yang raised the bamboo blinds to disperse some of the stuffiness inside. He turned to Xiao Chiye and presented a register of names. "The Biansha Horsemen we took prisoner number two thousand three hundred men. They're being held in the Dunzhou prison under watch of the Cizhou Garrison Troops."

Xiao Chiye flipped through the book without sitting and asked, his back to the light, "Where is Lei Jingzhe?"

“Dead.” Chen Yang paused. “He was dead long before we dug him out of the ruins. Based on his injuries, he died of strangulation.”

Xiao Chiye set the book down. He recalled the injury on Shen Zechuan’s right hand. After standing in silence for a while, he said, “Don’t wait until we return to Cizhou. It’ll be too late. Write a letter now and have it sent to Qidong posthaste. Use my personal seal—” At this point, he paused again and turned around. “No, affix Lanzhou’s seal.”

This was a matter concerning Zhongbo; personal relationships ought not factor into these discussions with Qi Zhuyin. The grand marshal had already done her part as a friend in taking care of Lu Pingyan on Lu Guangbai’s behalf. Xiao Chiye’s personal seal represented Libei, and if they continued asking her for favors, it would become a debt they couldn’t repay. Moreover, Shen Zechuan was the one in charge of Cizhou. As a commanding general of Libei, affixing his own seal to any missive would only diminish Shen Zechuan’s authority and prestige. Shen Zechuan would have to deal with Qi Zhuyin often in the future, and it would be inconvenient for both parties if they had to take Xiao Chiye into consideration every time.

“Lei Jingzhe was the perpetrator behind the turmoil and unrest in Dunzhou and Duanzhou. In this case, he led the Biansha Horsemen themselves into our borders. Libei and Cizhou joined forces to defeat the enemy. We fought the Biansha for the sake of the commoners of Zhongbo,” Chen Yang said smoothly. “Even if news of this incident should spread to Qudu, we are not in the wrong.”

“We are not in the wrong only because Qudu has no soldiers,” Xiao Chiye said. “Otherwise, there would be tens of thousands of charges slapped onto Lanzhou. But just as a cornered dog will jump over a wall, a desperate man will resort to drastic measures. Dunzhou is now in our possession. Lanzhou has three prefectures under his control. No matter how busy Xue Xiuzhuo and the empress dowager have been with their own affairs, they’re going to start thinking of ways to bring him to heel. The best thing for Qudu would be to set Qi Zhuyin loose; if she takes down Fanzhou first, Cizhou will lose their buffer in the southeast.”

But this matter was not yet truly pressing. Bianjun Commandery was presently without a commander, and Qi Zhuyin had moved from Cangjun to Bianjun to hold the fort on Lu Guangbai's behalf. The Biansha Horsemen had transferred Hassen from the southeast to the north, yet this hadn't given Qidong an advantage. Amur was still deploying his elite troops and generals there too.

Xiao Chiye had been able to make it to Cizhou this time in part thanks to Xiao Fangxu.

In the wake of Zhongbo's fall, Duanzhou had been left without soldiers and consequently became a vulnerability along the borders of the Zhou empire. But Amur did not invade a second time. Instead, he concentrated his troops in the north and southeast, ignoring Zhongbo to chip away at the two strongholds that were Libei and Qidong. Xiao Fangxu had long thought Amur was using diversionary tactics, and now the emergence of the Scorpions had proven to Xiao Fangxu that Amur hadn't given up on Zhongbo at all. For this reason, he would have to take Shen Zechuan's proposal to rebuild Zhongbo's line of defense seriously.

Xiao Chiye made a few inquiries about Dunzhou's military affairs. They were beginning to discuss the armory when Gu Jin entered.

"Master." Gu Jin cast a glance back at the courtyard. "Fei Sheng and the others are still kneeling on the veranda."

Turning his head, Xiao Chiye looked at the overlapping shadows through the window lattice. He did not answer.

Not daring to bring it up again, Gu Jin retreated to the side.

There were still bandits in Dunzhou they had yet to deal with. For the moment, the fifteen thousand men Xiao Chiye had brought were enough to keep them in check with their mere presence. Liu'er's knees had almost buckled when he saw Xiao Chiye. With Lei Jingzhe dead, the old man wouldn't dare hatch any more plans. But he was ultimately far from an upright citizen, and Xiao Chiye had no intention of letting him hang around; he sent Liu'er to Kong Ling for him to make the necessary arrangements. As for the Dunzhou armory, Xiao Chiye didn't lay a finger on it. They still had plans to use this place after conquering it.

He busied himself until noon before remembering Shen Zechuan was still asleep. He returned to the room for a look and saw he was now out of bed, standing under the eaves listening to Kong Ling's reports.

Upon seeing Xiao Chiye, Shen Zechuan silently averted his gaze.

Xiao Chiye let it lie. He'd gone too far in bullying Shen Zechuan yesterday, and he could tell Shen Zechuan hadn't gotten over it. It'd been an early morning; Xiao Chiye passed by and lifted the curtains to enter the empty inner chamber, where he took the chance to catch a nap while he had free time.

When he awoke, Shen Zechuan was sitting at the desk, looking at Cizhou's case files.

Xiao Chiye stood and wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Have you eaten?"

"No." Shen Zechuan's voice was low.

He wanted to laugh, finding Lanzhou rather pitiable. No doubt he was unaccustomed to being smooth down there—although the way he sat so primly was unexpectedly a little seductive. Xiao Chiye sat down on the other side of the desk and propped a leg over his knee before drawling, "Let's call for some food. We can have a bite."

Shen Zechuan set his brush down. He looked like he was about to speak when someone entered the outer chamber.

Chen Yang stopped outside the bamboo curtain. "Master, Lao-Hu is here."

Only then did Xiao Chiye remember he had asked Chen Yang to summon Tantai Hu before he took his nap. There was something he wanted to ask him in Shen Zechuan's presence. He straightened up slightly. "Let him in—"

Across the desk, Shen Zechuan suddenly mouthed: *Don't.*

Xiao Chiye shot him a questioning look, but Shen Zechuan ignored him. Outside, Tantai Hu had already crossed the threshold and was waiting for Xiao Chiye to summon him into the inner chamber. Xiao Chiye didn't understand what Shen Zechuan had meant, so he spoke to Tantai Hu

through the curtain: “I called you here to answer a question. I didn’t mention it before in Libei, but now the time is right. Let me ask you—will you stay here and defend Dunzhou?”

Tantai Hu had been at Xiao Chiye’s side since before they left Qudu; he was taken aback at this question. After a moment of befuddlement, he asked, “Is Master remaining in Dunzhou too?”

Twisting his thumb ring, Xiao Chiye said, “You had no choice but to take orders from me in Qudu, and circumstance forced your hand when we fled to Libei. Things are different now. I’d like you to assume sole responsibility—”

Xiao Chiye, glancing down, saw Shen Zechuan had crawled toward him under the desk. Realizing this boded ill, he reached for Shen Zechuan’s head to stop him. Shen Zechuan, mouth already occupied, bit down. Xiao Chiye felt the stab of pain, but didn’t make a sound.

Outside, Tantai Hu had honed in on the key point and was becoming agitated. “Does Master not want me to return to Libei?”

The tip of Shen Zechuan’s nose was edging along Xiao Chiye’s entire length. Xiao Chiye wanted to shift away, but Shen Zechuan was wedged between his legs, and Xiao Chiye couldn’t flip the desk over and scoop him up now. They hadn’t done anything last night. Xiao Chiye, keeping Shen Zechuan’s injury in mind, had simply fallen asleep after shaving him clean. Now the hot puffs of Shen Zechuan’s breath against him were making him hard.

“You are a native of Zhongbo, and so are the trusted aides under your command. We spoke about this before—” Xiao Chiye composed himself and continued after a moment’s pause. “…back in Qudu.”

Shen Zechuan’s tongue was hot on him.

Xiao Chiye tilted his head back and carefully swallowed a sigh. Sheathed in Shen Zechuan’s mouth, he heard Tantai Hu fall to his knees with a *thud*.

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s upturned eyes misted over as he took Xiao Chiye deeper into his throat. Without moving, he raised his eyes to

look at Xiao Chiye, the initial viciousness in them rippling into glistening waves that only intensified Xiao Chiye's desire to bite him. With nowhere to place his hands, Xiao Chiye let them skim along Shen Zechuan's jaw before finally coming to rest at the back of his head.

"Don't cry," Xiao Chiye rasped. Then, "Continue."

Tantai Hu choked back the tears that were threatening to spill over and said as he knelt outside, "Mas—I followed the supreme commander for five, six years. It was all due to the supreme commander's decision to promote me that I could lead the troops. After we left Qudu, it was the supreme commander who trained and guided me throughout. When you told me to keep the layout of the camp defenses in mind when we fought at Third Sand Camp, I thought you wanted me to remain in Libei and guard the camps for you. Yet now you're leaving me in Dunzhou?!"

Too hot.

Xiao Chiye raised a finger to loosen his collar. Sparks shot up his spine. All he could think about was how to make Shen Zechuan cry until he could cry no more.

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Chapter 177:
Torrential Rain

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the blinds, Tantai Hu was pouring his heart out. “I have no objections if the supreme commander wants me to defend Dunzhou. But I simply can’t bear to part with my brothers from Libei, and even more, the supreme commander. Dunzhou is where my brother was first stationed. I’m really…”

Xiao Chiye’s fingers sank deep into Shen Zechuan’s hair. He caressed Shen Zechuan’s earlobe with his thumb, rubbing it until that jade earring reflected a faint scarlet hue. The window was open, and now and then, the muffled sound of thunder rumbled in the distance. Xiao Chiye paid it no heed.

The inner and outer chambers were separated by a single bamboo blind. Tantai Hu’s voice was crystal clear. Shen Zechuan’s cheeks were hopelessly flushed, his tongue unpracticed and his lips slow. He looked so tender like this, succulent and ripe for the taking. The idea had hit him on the spur of the moment. How could he know it would be so hard to execute? His mouth was stuffed full, eyes watering as he choked.

When all was said and done, Tantai Hu was a man; he felt ashamed to be kneeling there crying. He mastered himself and reverted to his original form of address: “Dunzhou currently has no garrison troops. Since Master wishes to leave this place in my hands, I’ll have to prove myself worthy of your trust.”

Waves of pleasure crashed over Xiao Chiye as he grasped Shen Zechuan’s right wrist while pressing his other hand down through Shen Zechuan’s hair. The space under the desk was cramped and narrow. Shen Zechuan, so sensitive to the heat, was soon drenched in sweat.

“I’ll leave you five thousand soldiers.” Xiao Chiye’s throat rolled. “All future accounts will go through Cizhou. You’ll be under Lanzhou’s command. If there’s anything that needs attention, let him know as soon as possible.”

Tantai Hu knew Shen Zechuan was in the inner chamber too. He thought for a moment and said gravely, “Dunzhou will have to recruit new soldiers and rebuild the city walls. It’ll be expensive; I’ll have to discuss the exact figures with the prefectural governor later.”

He ran through a few other topics, all government affairs that required further deliberation. Had it been any other time, Shen Zechuan would have summoned Kong Ling to draft up a list with Tantai Hu. But he was in no position to consider business at the moment, and even if he’d had any thoughts on the matter, they vanished under the pressure of Xiao Chiye’s hand. The mist in those eyes pooled into crystal droplets that fell from his lashes like beads tumbling off a broken string.

It was simply too stimulating a sight.

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip in Shen Zechuan’s hair. The hissing of the rain outside was loud at some moments, soft at others. Drool dripped from the corner of Shen Zechuan’s mouth. In this harried moment, he didn’t realize Tantai Hu had taken his leave until Xiao Chiye raised a foot and kicked the desk away.

Muffled thunder crashed through the sky. The rain poured harder, pelting the windows and sending broken beads of water splashing everywhere. Xiao Chiye didn’t get up. He leaned back in his chair and hauled Shen Zechuan into his lap to teach him a lesson. Both of Shen Zechuan’s hands were held fast behind his back as he straddled Xiao Chiye and sank down, murmuring under the din of the rain.

So smooth. Within just a few thrusts, Shen Zechuan was coming apart. He shuddered amid the jolts of pleasure, a pitiful sight as he dirtied Xiao Chiye’s clothes grinding against him. Xiao Chiye played no tricks this time. He held Shen Zechuan’s wrists in place, letting him plead for mercy with his repeated cries of *A-Ye* and *Ce’an*. He settled accounts with Shen Zechuan, along with the interest.

Outside, the rain was still falling.

When the rain came to a stop, Xiao Chiye tumbled onto the bedding and pulled Shen Zechuan closer. He was still carefully grasping Shen

Zechuan's right wrist as he secured him against his own body to rest. Shen Zechuan drifted off and woke up again, his head pillowed on Xiao Chiye's chest as he mumbled something Xiao Chiye couldn't quite make out, even after listening. Xiao Chiye was so exhausted he could barely open his eyes. He slurred a vague reply, and the two of them exchanged incoherent murmurs, neither making sense of the other, before gradually sinking into a deep sleep.

Xiao Chiye slumbered until noon the next day. Still half asleep, he heard Shen Zechuan calling for him. He opened bleary eyes. "Hm. Hm?"

Shen Zechuan, too drowsy to raise his head, grasped Xiao Chiye's little braid and held tight.

After dozing a while longer, the military affairs crowding Xiao Chiye's mind finally woke him up. He had been too rough the night before, and now he rolled over to pin Shen Zechuan to the sheets. "Wake up. Time to drink your medicine."

Shen Zechuan covered Xiao Chiye's face with his good left hand and pretended not to hear. Xiao Chiye sighed and buried his head in Shen Zechuan's chest, nuzzling against him until Shen Zechuan sank into the bedding. "Shen Lanzhou, help me out of bed."

His head was so heavy Shen Zechuan could hardly breathe, and tugging on Xiao Chiye's little braid elicited no reaction either. He opened his eyes and said feebly, "My back is sore, and my knees are hurting. I can't get up."

Xiao Chiye slid a hand under Shen Zechuan's back and helped him sit, then hoisted Shen Zechuan over his shoulder before getting out of bed and heading for the bath. Shen Zechuan was still in a daze as he was carried into the water. He leaned against Xiao Chiye, loath to lift so much as a finger. Xiao Chiye didn't want to move either, so they sank into each other's embrace as they soaked in the water.

Chen Yang had waited the entire morning. When he finally heard the door open, he found Xiao Chiye dressed in a fresh, loose-fitting robe with wooden clogs. Chen Yang stood aside to let the maidservants in and caught

sight of Shen Zechuan, similarly dressed in a loose-fitting robe, stepping out in his own clogs.

Neither looked like they had gotten much sleep.

“Where’s Lao-Hu?” Xiao Chiye asked. “Call him over again later. I forgot to speak to him about a number of issues yesterday.”

“Summon Fei Sheng first.” Shen Zechuan looked over at the veranda. “Why is he kneeling?”

Chen Yang nodded and took his leave to fetch them both.

Fei Sheng was still kneeling in the courtyard when Kong Ling bustled over, draped in a straw rain cloak. He bowed his head. “Mister Chengfeng.”

Kong Ling removed his bamboo hat and swept off the rain cloak, which he hung up to dry. “Why are you still here?”

“Master has not instructed otherwise,” Fei Sheng answered.

He had knelt for two days. He knew Xiao Chiye was giving him the cold shoulder, but he didn’t express the slightest resentment over it.

Understanding dawned, and Kong Ling reassured him, “The marquis and prefectural governor spend more time apart than together; it’s inevitable that the marquis is furious over the governor’s injury. The war has been taxing these days. His anger will fade.”

“As guards,” Fei Sheng replied swiftly, “we ought to be punished for letting harm come to our master. I haven’t seen Master for two days, and I’m worried about his injuries.”

Kong Ling nodded. “Your loyalty doesn’t go unnoticed by the marquis. Wait just a little longer, and it’ll be your turn to be summoned.”

Sensing Kong Ling knew something he didn’t, Fei Sheng said, “I, Fei the Tenth, am an unrefined man of little education. Sir, please enlighten me.”

Kong Ling merely smiled as he looked up to see Chen Yang walking toward them. “Don’t fret. You’ve had a rough time kneeling these last two

days, but a bright future is sure to follow.”

Fei Sheng had worried Xiao Chiye was merely waiting to tie up loose ends before settling scores with him, but Kong Ling’s words seemed to indicate otherwise. These days of kneeling had all but drained any pride he’d felt after the battle. Given what he’d seen of Xiao Chiye’s expression, he was sure Xiao Chiye would punish him, though he didn’t know how. He scrambled to his feet at Chen Yang’s summons and followed him along the veranda.

Inside, Shen Zechuan was sitting in a chair drinking his medicine while Xiao Chiye kept close watch over his shoulder, ensuring he drank every last drop. The bitterness of the medicine made Shen Zechuan frown, but he didn’t dare spit it out while Xiao Chiye was watching. He swallowed with difficulty. Even strong tea was often too bitter for him. Without Ji Gang around, he would pick and choose his medicine, and unless he was seriously injured the way he’d been on the way to Dunzhou, he would never give in.

Without looking up from his stack of military documents, Xiao Chiye pushed a small plate of honey candy toward Shen Zechuan.

Fei Sheng entered, made his obeisance, and knelt before them.

It wouldn’t do for Shen Zechuan to stuff himself with candy in front of his subordinates. He retracted his fingertips from the rim of the plate and endured the bitterness. “Have everyone’s injuries been attended to?”

“Yes. They were all superficial injuries, none serious,” Fei Sheng answered truthfully.

“If they’re injured, they should take time to recuperate,” Shen Zechuan said, solemn. “Exempt them from shift duties for the next few days; leave the night watch to Chen Yang and the rest. Our two brothers who died in the battle will be buried with full honors. If they have family in Cizhou, take forty taels of silver from my account and see to the arrangements on my behalf.”

“Of course I’ll carry out Master’s instructions to the letter.” Fei Sheng was delighted upon hearing this, but didn’t dare to let it show on his face. Shen Zechuan wouldn’t assign just anyone to see to these things on his

behalf. Such tasks used to all be handled by Qiao Tianya. To be charged with drawing money from Shen Zechuan's personal account was a sign of Shen Zechuan's trust—something far more valuable than any monetary reward. Fei Sheng was beside himself with joy, but upon seeing Xiao Chiye stony-faced beside him, he lowered his head and quietly took his leave.

It was true that the Embroidered Uniform Guard had done their duty and more on that tower. They hadn't turned tail and fled in the face of danger, so Shen Zechuan would certainly reward them. Xiao Chiye had made Fei Sheng kneel because he wanted to knock it into Fei Sheng's head that they were *guards*. They were at fault for every injury their master sustained, and they shouldn't forget it simply because Shen Zechuan didn't often hold them accountable. Yet there was another motive behind Xiao Chiye's actions as well: If he was to first punish Fei Sheng, Shen Zechuan's later reward would appear magnanimous in comparison, and Fei Sheng would remember Shen Zechuan's kindness all the more.

Shen Zechuan turned his head, thinking to say a word to Xiao Chiye during this interval. Xiao Chiye stuffed a candy into Shen Zechuan's mouth.

Kong Ling entered.

"We've now taken Dunzhou, but how to go about defending it is a problem," Xiao Chiye began with no change in expression. "Cizhou has no commanding general at present, so I'm leaving Tantai Hu here along with five thousand men from the Imperial Army and Cizhou's Garrison Troops. We'll need to step up recruitment this winter. Repairing the city's fortifications is also of utmost urgency."

Chen Yang handed the register of soldiers' names to Kong Ling.

At this point, Shen Zechuan ought to have said a few words—but he still had the candy in his mouth, so Xiao Chiye continued. "Dunzhou's yamen needs to be rebuilt. The household registers must be audited. Chengfeng, give it some thought. See if anyone from Cizhou's screening process this year can be assigned here to give Tantai Hu a hand."

Zhou Gui's advisors had been the ones to conduct the screening of the clerks for Cizhou's yamen. Two men had been executed for their part in

the bribery incident with Gao Zhongxiong; in handing this task to Kong Ling, Shen Zechuan was giving the advisors of Cizhou a second chance.

Kong Ling rose to his feet. “I have a few decent candidates in mind. Once I get back, I’ll draft a list and present it to Your Lordship for perusal. I’d like to ask for Yuanzhuo’s counsel on this as well.”

He’d deftly grasped the opportunity Shen Zechuan offered to elevate Yao Wenyu’s prestige while lowering his own. Although Chen Yang had seen advisors at work while following Xiao Chiye around the military tents, none had been so gracious. Surprised, he cast a glance at Kong Ling.

“As for the other arrangements, feel free to discuss the details with Tantai Hu,” Xiao Chiye said. “You were once the advisor to his elder brother, Tantai Long, so speak your mind. He respects you and won’t dare give you any attitude.”

The discussion turned to more governmental affairs in Dunzhou and plans to be decided and drafted. There was a group of merchants outside the courtyard waiting to see Shen Zechuan; Yan Heru and Haerigu had been locked away, and there were still questions about the Scorpions that had yet to be answered. For his part, Xiao Chiye had to pen a letter to Wu Ziyu, whom he had left behind in Libei. Snow had begun to fall in the north, and several roads were obstructed or damaged. It was the supply squad’s job to repair the paths, but they had only so much money and manpower. The order of priorities and the process of repairs were all decisions that had to go through Xiao Chiye.

This small sliver of time together had been all the respite they could eke out. Shen Zechuan had languished in bed this morning precisely because there was so much to do. Once the merchants entered, they made such a din, with everyone trying to get a word in at once, that Xiao Chiye felt a tiny pang of remorse. Last night had been exceedingly satisfying, but as a result, Shen Zechuan had to drag his exhausted body through the day’s affairs.

Still feeling sorry, Xiao Chiye glanced over his shoulder at Shen Zechuan, only to find that Shen Zechuan was leaning back in his chair, listening to the merchants’ ruckus with a deadpan expression. His brush

moved absently over the paper, doodling a kind of tortoise naughty children drew because its name sounded like *son of a bitch.*

Xiao Chiye laughed.

Then he watched Shen Zechuan write beneath it: *Xiao Ce'an.*

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Chapter 178:
Merchants

THE MERCHANTS, worried about their livelihoods, were all anxious to meet with Shen Zechuan.

The hall was saturated with noise, a cacophony of accents engaged in a sprawling conversation where everyone was talking without understanding one another, like a chicken trying to talk to a duck. Without the Yan Clan playing mediator, many of them couldn't even speak official dialect fluently. Yan Heru had been the one to set up this small trade market in Dunzhou, and the merchants had previously dealt with the bandits and the tribes of Biansha in trades for tea, salt, copper, and iron. With Yan Heru now in custody, they worried Shen Zechuan would bring them up on charges. They had made this plan to call on Shen Zechuan as a group, hoping that if they banded together, the law would not be enforced because the offenders were simply too numerous.

Chen Yang called for the maidservants to prepare tea. Not only was the hall packed with people sitting, the foot of the veranda was crammed with standing merchants who had joined after getting wind of the news. These people had arrived in Dunzhou from all over the land and were now crowding together, making such a ruckus the courtyard resembled a bustling downtown.

In the center of all of this sat Shen Zechuan, answering, "That makes sense," regardless of what he heard. The din persisted until nightfall, yet they made no progress. Shen Zechuan had replied to every question, but he hadn't answered any of them. By now they were starving, choking on their own pent-up frustration.

Xiao Chiye had gone next door to finish discussing military affairs with Tantai Hu. When he stepped out, the sky was dark, and the lamps had been lit in the hall. The merchants outside were reclining in various poses on mats laid on the ground, while Shen Zechuan was still inside giving the merchants the runaround.

Fei Sheng lifted the curtains and ducked out. Stepping over to Xiao Chiye, he said in a soft voice, “Master asks if you’re done with your discussion. If so, we can serve the meal.”

“Have these people been dismissed?”

“Master says not to dismiss them and let them remain here,” Fei Sheng replied. “He invited them to stay the night.”

Xiao Chiye nodded. “Then let’s eat in the courtyard next door.”

The merchants had made up their minds: They wouldn’t leave until they got a definitive answer from Shen Zechuan. At the very least they had to see Yan Heru, since Yan Heru had given them his guarantee; their goods were all stored in a different courtyard belonging to the Yan Clan. What would become of them now that the Biansha Horsemen and the bandits had retreated? Whether they’d leave their goods here or not depended on the negotiations.

But Shen Zechuan was simply too good at equivocating and refused to give them anything precise. Fearing the soldiers who were everywhere in Dunzhou, the merchants didn’t dare fall afoul of Shen Zechuan. They could only tamp down their anger and continue to sit, hoping to wear Shen Zechuan down.

Once Shen Zechuan had finished reading all the important affairs of Dunzhou, he reckoned it was about time. On seeing Fei Sheng return, he rose and said with a smile, “Gentlemen, you’ve been sitting all day. We can discuss this matter again at a later time. I’ve asked my men to prepare a banquet—let’s talk more during the feast.”

With that, he ducked under the curtains Fei Sheng lifted and left.

The merchants waited a long time, but Shen Zechuan did not return, and neither did the maidservants enter to serve any food or drink. Curious, some of them lifted the curtains and stepped out for a look, but found only familiar faces left in the courtyard. Not even a guard was in sight.

One man who had smoked a few pipes while waiting grew anxious and slapped his thigh. “He couldn’t have made a run for it, could he?”

Instantly alarmed, the merchants crowded together like a flock of sparrows and charged over to the entrance of the courtyard, where they discovered the doors were sealed shut.

“Don’t tell me they are planning to silence us!” Someone exclaimed in horror. “No! Your Lordship, Your Lordship! We’re all upright businessmen with the proper documentation from the local authorities!”

Hearing the pounding at the door, Fei Sheng, who was stationed outside, hoisted his blade over his shoulder and called back, “What’s all this fuss? The governor has invited everyone to have a rest in the courtyard. Weren’t you the ones who insisted on staying? Sleep here then!”

“We want to see His Lordship!” the merchants hollered.

Fei Sheng sneered. “Haven’t you seen him? My master spoke with you gentlemen half the day.” Without moving from his post, he gestured for someone to bring a chair over for him and sat down facing the door. “We’ve checked all of your wares. We found copper and iron—trade of which is strictly prohibited. Surely you don’t expect us to just hand them back.”

“There’s unrest everywhere right now!” The man with the pipe stood on tiptoe to look through a crack between the doors and quibble, “So we happened to get our hands on a few things, but we only traded them this one time. We’re all honest men here!”

Fei Sheng didn’t beat around the bush. He raised the book in his hand and flipped through it. “Know what I’m holding? It’s the registration log from the Yan Clan’s broker, with detailed records of every item each of you import into Dunzhou every month. It’s all written down here in black and white—the records can’t lie, can it?”

The merchants held a whispered consultation, mopping sweat from their faces and flicking their sleeves as they crowded together. Fei Sheng couldn’t decipher what they were saying amid the din. Eventually, the man with the pipe craned his neck and shouted back through the door, “Tea hasn’t been prohibited in a long time. Hey, I’m a tea trader! Open the door! Don’t involve the innocent!”

“Zhongbo has been in a state of decline these few years. Who are you selling tea to in Dunzhou? The Yan Clan themselves are the largest tea

merchants in the south.” Fei Sheng lifted his Xiuchun saber and rapped on the door panel with its sheath. “Stop making a ruckus! Hurry up and spit out the truth!”

“What truth do you want us to spit out?” The man stubbornly refused to admit to any wrongdoing. “As you say, the goods are recorded clearly in the book. Match the goods with the names in the book, and everything will be clear.”

Fei Sheng swung the book in his hand. “If we send this to the yamen in Qudu, none of you will escape prosecution. I’ll tell you this: My master is a benevolent man. He’s giving you the opportunity to make amends. All you need to do is truthfully list down who you consulted with in Dunzhou and who you converted the silver for, and I’ll open the doors and let you out. Everything else will be water under the bridge.”

Out of the quartet of tea, salt, copper, and iron, only the trade of tea was not controlled by the imperial court. The Xi Clan had only established a copper mine in Juexi with special permission decreed by imperial edict. They were required to present the mine’s accounts to the Ministry of Revenue and Ministry of Works for audit on a monthly basis and to accommodate personnel specifically assigned to supervise the operation. But the business was lucrative, with plenty of potential to skim off the top, and the supervisors—all of whom were picked by the Ministry of Revenue—were often in cahoots with the Xi Clan. They colluded to falsify the accounts submitted to the imperial court, which allowed the Xi Clan to conceal copper and iron above and beyond what they reported. Any movement of copper or iron outside the Xi Clan’s court-sanctioned businesses was considered unlawful collusion between local officials and merchants. Just like the military provisions, this copper and iron had been stolen from Great Zhou in exchange for huge profits.

Yan Heru’s brokers and pleasure houses in Dunzhou not only provided these far-flung merchants opportunities for trade but also a place to offload stolen goods on behalf of the provincial officials they’d acquired them from. Here, Yan Heru’s people converted those illicit wares to silver. When Liu’er had led Shen Zechuan into Dunzhou, he hadn’t told the whole

story: The need for a specific signal to enter the city wasn’t merely for the purpose of playing by the rules, but to guard this secret.

As the meaning of Fei Sheng’s words sank in, an uproar broke out on the other side of the door. All kinds of accents overlapped as the merchants jostled with each other. Fei Sheng shut the book, blew on the hot tea in his hand, and took a sip.

Chen Yang had instructed the kitchen to prepare fish for dinner, and as a result, a delighted Shen Zechuan ate an extra half bowl of rice. The remaining half of the fish ended up in Xiao Chiye’s stomach. As long as the second young master didn’t have to pick out the bones himself, he was more than happy to eat fish.

After their meal, the two stood under the eaves and listened as the merchants in the courtyard next door cursed and swore. Xiao Chiye rinsed his mouth and wiped it. “Don’t you have a Scorpion in custody? Call him over. I have a question for him.”

Chen Yang left to summon Haerigu.

Xiao Chiye glanced at Shen Zechuan. “You haven’t been calling for Ding Tao to attend you these last few days. What happened?”

“Lei Jingzhe was in Dunzhou,” Shen Zechuan replied, meeting his gaze. “If no one’s keeping watch over Li Xiong, he might run out to look for him. Ding Tao is his playmate; it’s only fitting that the two children keep each other company.”

Xiao Chiye raised his teacup to take a sip. He appeared to have believed him.

Shen Zechuan tilted his head, exposing a neck adorned with the faint traces of Xiao Chiye’s teeth. Set against those dark marks, the jade earring appeared even brighter. Shen Zechuan shifted the subject away from Ding Tao. “Your armguard was damaged. I’ll have another made when we return to Cizhou.”

Thinking of the armguard reminded Xiao Chiye of Hassen. He looked into the night and said, “It’s still usable, just needs some repairs.”

Xiao Chiye had never mentioned Hassen to Shen Zechuan. That defeat had quickly silenced him, smothering all his lofty sentiments and ambitions. Transporting supplies was exhausting to be sure, but everyone was exhausted in Libei. Even the heir consort Lu Yizhi spent her days patching up old coats to provide warm winter clothes to the battlefield. Xiao Fangxu had pushed the blade that was Xiao Chiye down into its sheath, preventing him from putting his brilliance on display. Yet now Xiao Chiye was glad to endure this hardship; he was willing to bide his time and wait for the right opportunity to shine.

“I’ll have two made for you,” Shen Zechuan said seriously, “and engrave my name on them.”

Xiao Chiye reached out and pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin. After a moment, he said, “Let’s not engrave any names on the armguard.”

Blades on the battlefield didn’t discriminate between friend and foe; injury and death in war were inevitable. Xiao Chiye was unwilling to let Shen Zechuan risk himself out there, even in name. He wanted a good omen—he wanted Shen Zechuan to live to a ripe old age.

Haerigu had been locked up with Yan Heru and left to starve for two days. He was still wounded, and his lips were cracked when the guards dragged him under the eaves. He braced himself, eyes glassy.

Xiao Chiye squatted down, shrouding Haerigu beneath his shadow. Gu Jin pressed Haerigu’s head down and brushed aside his hair to reveal the scorpion inked on the side of his neck.

“Scorpion of Gedal,” Xiao Chiye said gravely. “What are you doing in Zhongbo?”

Arms tightly bound, Haerigu scuffed the ground with his forehead, refusing to answer. Gu Jin gripped the back of his neck and yanked his head up. “Answer the question.”

Haerigu’s chest worked as he cast a swift glance at Shen Zechuan, standing by the door. This look infuriated Xiao Chiye, who slammed

Haerigu's head back down to the ground. The sounds of his struggle rang out as Xiao Chiye pressed him down against the ice-cold floorboards.

"I'm not the enemy!" No matter how he tried, Haerigu could not break free. He felt as though he was being crushed by an iron arm. He strained to look up, but all he could see were Xiao Chiye's dark boots. "Help me, Shen—"

Xiao Chiye's face was unreadable.

Gradually, Haerigu ran out of breath. His cheek scraped the floor; desperate to live, he shouted, "I still have more to say!" He gasped for air. "Don't you want to know about Bai Cha?!"

"Before you learn how to answer, we don't want to know a thing," Xiao Chiye responded.

Haerigu felt the strength of the pressure Xiao Chiye was exerting on his neck. He raised his head with all his might, sweat trickling down his temples as he coughed and choked out, "I—Zhongbo! To—to flee for my life!"

The two fingers on Shen Zechuan's right hand had begun to throb faintly with pain. He took a step closer and stopped beside Haerigu. "Three days ago, you said you called me a son of Gedal because Bai Cha divided you all up."

Haerigu swallowed thickly and gasped out, "That's right. It's because Bai Cha divided us—that's why you exist!"

Shen Zechuan frowned slightly.

Xiao Chiye abruptly let go, and Haerigu took in huge gulps of air. Gu Jin lifted him up. He was covered in grime, and took a moment to recover before blurting out, "In the Biansha tongue, Gedal means *light*. This was the name Bai Cha gave it. Your mother's story is a long one—so if you don't mind, please give me a drink of water first. I swear, every word I speak is the truth."

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Chapter 179:
Woman

WHAT LEI JINGZHE had said about Bai Cha being a whore in Gedal had been a blatant lie: Bai Cha had never set foot in Gedal. The bloom of her beauty and fame had been brief, and she had spent half her life in Duanzhou.

Thirty years ago, when the king wolf, Xiao Fangxu, was still herding horses at Luoxia Pass with a stalk of grass in his mouth, and Amur was still a lowly servant flying falcons along the banks of the Chashi River, Bai Cha had already been sold into a brothel in Duanzhou. The thought that they might later change the landscape of the Zhou empire and Biansha had not yet crossed the boys' minds, but the girl was already keenly aware of the path she was about to embark on.

Cuiqing had been Bai Cha's madam. The procuress had been youthful then, with breasts as fair as snow that peeked from her bodice when she bent over. By simply leaning against the door, she could command the attention of every man who passed by. A woman with a discerning eye for hidden gems, she picked Bai Cha out from a passel of girls and polished her to a shine.

Back then, there was no Libei, and the north was dominated by the Hanma tribe. Duanzhou, with the Chashi River as its border, was surrounded by enemies to the north and east. It was here the bandits found a lucrative new trade. They snatched women from decent families and conspired with the yamen to forge household registrations, then sold a portion of the girls to the pleasure houses in Duanzhou. The rest were taken to the east bank of the Chashi River, where they were sold to the Biansha tribes.

Cuiqing's business didn't blossom overnight, and she was constantly irked by her competitors in the flesh trade who crowded her out. She had used half her life savings to feed and train these girls and invited a teacher to instruct them in the four arts—music, weiqi, calligraphy, and painting—

in hopes that she could hold her head high when they were ready to serve patrons. Of the girls, it was Bai Cha with whom she was the most exacting, and indeed, Bai Cha did not let her down: In the following years, she went on to become the foremost courtesan in the establishment.

This was Cuiqing's beginning, and it was also where Bai Cha's story truly began.

"Do you know who had the highest death count on the banks of the Chashi River at that time?" Haerigu waited a moment. When no one responded, he answered his own question: "Women."

When the bandits were at the peak of their power, they boasted nearly ten thousand men. They marauded all along the Chashi River, exchanging women for money. Even if some woman managed to escape by sheer luck, there was no way she could return home to her family.

"Later, the tribes sent us to Gedal," Haerigu said. "At the same time, they cast away the women who were…no longer needed. Sometimes, these women would attempt to return home on foot, but it was rare for them to be accepted back by their parents."

These women had lost proof of their household registration, which made it difficult for them to return to Great Zhou. Even if they managed it, their parents and siblings often refused to open the door for them. They were better off dead than alive. If they returned pregnant, they were guilty of the most heinous of crimes: Not only would they be beaten upon returning to their hometowns, they might even be burned to death.

Haerigu pressed his parched lips into a thin line. "My mother was a girl from Dengzhou. The bandits sold her to the Qingshu tribe, and she became a captive of the tribe's leader. He forced himself on her, then gave her to his younger brother before his death. This man, in turn, gave her to another man during a banquet. She was passed from tribe to tribe in Biansha. Eventually, she fled with me. We went through untold hardships to make it to Duanzhou. Miraculously, her registration was still intact, and the yamen still had her missing-person case open. She was leered at, and cursed, but we eventually returned to Dengzhou, where her younger brother took us in."

The shouts of the merchants next door had quieted; it was getting to be very late at night.

Sitting under the eaves, Haerigu drank the bowl of water he'd asked for and continued, "My mother was elated, and did as much as she could to supplement the family income. We stayed there half a month. Then, one night, she was once again loaded into a carriage and sold by her own brother to Duanzhou."

Haerigu's mother was grievously wounded. But it was a wound unseen, a violence inherent in being born a woman. She received training in the pleasure quarters of Duanzhou. To live was to suffer. Haerigu could swear on his life that his mother was a kind and harmless woman. But there was no longer any way out for her.

"Duanzhou was where she met Bai Cha." Haerigu shifted as if to look at Shen Zechuan, but having learned his lesson, he trained his eyes on Xiao Chiye instead. "Seeing Bai Cha, you would never have guessed she was the guardian of the Chashi River banks. Cuiqing's repeated expansion of the pleasure house was, in fact, Bai Cha's idea. Using her influence over Cuiqing, she built a sufficiently strong network in Duanzhou to take in these discarded women and children."

Bai Cha did not fight alone. She merely took the lead in lifting the veil. These women moved unseen among scenes of debauched and carnal pleasure, contending against the unending night. This war was a soundless one fought in the quiet, one where Bai Cha realized her efforts were but a drop in the bucket.

"It wasn't easy to get registered in Duanzhou, and the patrols of the garrison troops were limited to the city. The sanctuary Bai Cha provided couldn't surmount these obstacles. She was a bird trapped in a barrel. Heaven wouldn't help, but she thought some people ought to pay the price." Haerigu lifted his eyes and said slowly, "Bai Cha set her sights on the bandits. She wanted them to be punished first.

"The Zhu Clan was deeply entwined with the bandits back then. It was thanks to their backing that the bandits were so lawless in Duanzhou. Lei Jingzhe's mother was a woman named Xiaoyinlei, who married into the

Zhu Clan of Duanzhou. She attempted to persuade her husband to send troops to suppress the bandits, but it was to no avail. That year, Shen Wei left Qudu, and the original Provincial Administration Commissioner of Zhongbo was transferred from his post. Shen Wei was conferred Prince of Jianxing, and Bai Cha made up her mind to marry him."

Even many years after Shen Wei met Bai Cha, he was never sure whether their first encounter had been by chance or design. But Shen Wei was enraptured. He spent thousands of gold on the beauty before winning her heart and taking her home in his embrace.

"Shortly after Bai Cha married Shen Wei, Xiaoyinlei gave birth to Lei Jingzhe. During the child's one-month celebration banquet, Bai Cha spoke with Xiaoyinlei, who subsequently put another suggestion before her husband Zhu. This time, she told him Shen Wei would soon carry out a thorough investigation in Zhongbo. If her husband wanted to remain an official, he had to cut ties with the bandits and make the first move against them. Not long after, Zhu submitted a lengthy report to Dunzhou giving Shen Wei an account of every crime the bandits had committed in Duanzhou. He pushed all the blame onto the bandits and ended the missive by requesting that Shen Wei send troops to wipe the bandits out."

Shen Wei had agreed. He was new to his post and needed to prove his utility to Qudu. Tantai Long deployed his troops and joined forces with the Duanzhou Garrison Troops to fight their way across the Chashi River and destroy Gedal, the bandits' trading post with the Biansha tribes.

"But as I said before, the bandits had all but joined the Liaoying tribe, and so their remaining men temporarily retreated into the desert. The spies the bandits left in the Duanzhou yamen did everything to ferret out the reason behind Zhu's betrayal, and after several attempts at investigation, noticed Xiaoyinlei. She fell out of favor with her husband, and a few years later, she passed away from illness in the Zhu Clan's own home. With her death, Lei Jingzhe fell out of favor too." Haerigu pointed at his neck. "This is why I say Lei Jingzhe is our brother. The first time he came to Gedal to look for us, he was seeking allies. He must have known what Xiaoyinlei had done, yet he still wished to become a bandit. He told me he hoped we could join forces to get even with Zhongbo. He wanted us to establish a

new army here and proclaim ourselves kings in Dunzhou and Duanzhou. After I rejected him, I assumed he gave up—but instead, he threw in his lot with Amur."

Shen Zechuan repeated his question: "Why did you say Bai Cha divided Gedal?"

"After Amur rose to prominence, he sought to maximize his resources. He asked us Scorpions to join him as the iron hammer that would oppose the Libei Armored Cavalry. Because of this, Bai Cha changed her plans. She wanted to bring Gedal into Great Zhou. At her behest, we resisted the Hanma tribe's attempts to conscript us. We would no longer be their slaves. A group of us retreated to the west side of the Chashi River to stand with my mother. Amur refused to give up, but Gedal had already been torn in two."

Haerigu pointed at himself. "The Zhongbo faction, led by me, and the Biansha faction, led by Jida. Jida believed there was no way to obtain land by relying on the strength of women, and that we needed a place where we could settle permanently. As for me, I didn't think the Biansha people would be open to reason. We would be slaves if we followed Amur, and they would never give us bastards a single cow or sheep to build a living on. In the end, we went our separate ways."

But Bai Cha had died.

Shen Zechuan once again recalled that dream; Shen Wei's terrified face had hidden behind the swinging bead curtain. His right hand spasmed. With this hand, he had killed both Jida and Lei Jingzhe. He swiftly wove a web in his mind, threading between points he had yet to see clearly.

"Once Bai Cha was killed, Gedal was as good as Amur's," Shen Zechuan said. He looked back upon all that had happened in Qudu, from the very beginning, and concluded. "That was the true prelude to the fall of Zhongbo."

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Chapter 180:
Shen Wei

EVERYTHING CAME BACK to the reign of the Guangcheng Emperor.

In Shen Zechuan's opinion, the empire's return to prosperity during the years of Yongyi had been the empire's last hope. Although this resurgence had been short-lived, it had brought a rising wave of talent. The reign of Yongyi had been an era that recognized wise and virtuous men—a period that had signaled the revival of Great Zhou.

At the time, Qudu had been ruled by a strong, decisive emperor at the peak of health. His civil officials had included men such as Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi, and his military generals counted among their ranks Qi Shiyu and Xiao Fangxu. These virtuous men of superior abilities had followed a strong sovereign. They had all possessed the same dream, and Great Zhou's ascendence in these years was a ray of light, a glory jointly created by such men. Amur, who was once a mere keeper of falcons, had then stood on the banks of the Chashi River and gazed across the turbulent water, seeing the Zhou empire as an invulnerable behemoth. The Twelve Tribes of Biansha were helpless against such a foe. Their strongest tribe, the Hanma, was repeatedly beaten back by Xiao Fangxu in the north. In deep winter, cattle and sheep that had frozen to death were a common sight in the grasslands.

At first, Amur led the Liaoying tribe away from the banks of the Chashi River simply to find a bit of land where they could survive. His brothers had starved to death in the snowstorms. The Liaoying tribe was small and weak; Amur had no choice but to lead them to live a nomadic life in the desert. As he roamed, he saw how the infighting within the Twelve Tribes of Biansha was mutually destructive. Like the Liaoying tribe, the Huiyan tribe was fragile. They couldn't survive under the rule of the strong tribes, and so they left the desert and allied with Xiao Fangxu. But Amur had had enough of shackles and fetters. He didn't believe the saker falcons the heavens bestowed upon them were born to be slaves. He did not want the mercy of the strong. He wanted to stand on his own two feet.

Amur rose to power in the desert. He was still a mere falcon keeper when he defeated Sude of the Hanma tribe and married Sude's younger sister, Surina. The next time Amur faced the Zhou empire, his opponent was Xiao Fangxu. Amur realized the Twelve Tribes of Biansha had to be united, as Great Zhou was; if he wished to grow as powerful as the Guangcheng Emperor, he had to become the ruler of the whole desert. He started to swallow up the other tribes.

But the Libei Armored Cavalry had military gear and supplies, and their iron wall proved an insurmountable defense that prevented Amur from penetrating deeper into the territory. Over the years he crossed swords with Xiao Fangxu, he discovered that the Guangcheng Emperor was already old, and that the empire was no longer so vibrant and flourishing as it had been even a few years ago. It dawned on him that there was more than one way to defeat this behemoth. He set his eyes back on the banks of the Chashi River and saw the opportunity Gedal presented. Thereafter, Amur decided to use the Scorpions of Gedal to dismantle the empire's defenses from within.

Bai Cha had been the immovable force that stood in Amur's way.

But how had Amur reached into Zhongbo to kill Bai Cha?

"Why did you choose to live in Gedal?" Xiao Chiye leaned forward. "Given that Bai Cha had set up a safe haven in Duanzhou."

"The implementation of the Yellow Register." Shen Zechuan thought of Qi Huilian. "That was a hurdle you couldn't get over."

"That's right. The majority of the women weren't registered. While Zhu was colluding with the bandits, they falsely reported many of these women's deaths in the name lists they sent to Qudu in order to remove them from the registries. Even if a few of their families were still around and willing to take them in, too many would end up sold again by their brothers at home, just as my mother was."

Haerigu looked downcast. "The courtesans Bai Cha led were limited in their power. To resolve the issue of household registration, many of them married clerks of the Duanzhou yamen. Bai Cha carved out an area of the pleasure quarter as our residence and raised the children there. But as the

number of refugees increased, it became more difficult to hide us. Children like me were a special challenge—our appearances were conspicuously foreign; even if we were to obtain the household registration, the people of Great Zhou would never accept us. Unable to walk about freely in Duanzhou, we survived off the women's savings in the backyards of the courtesans' quarters.

"Later, after Tantai Long suppressed the bandits for a time, Gedal entered a period of peace, and we returned. When Amur attempted to rally the Scorpions, he promised us land, cattle, and sheep. Jida believed him. As for those of us who did not, the Biansha Horsemen pursued us relentlessly; I had no choice but to return here once more. The courtesans continued to help us after Bai Cha's death, but their power was no longer what it had been. I led my people to scrape out a living on the fringes of Duanzhou. A few years later, Amur crossed the Chashi River and launched his surprise attack, and Zhongbo fell into lawlessness. That was when I entered Zhongbo, where I've lived until now."

Haerigu's throat was dry from so much talking. Chen Yang poured him another bowl of water. Murmuring his thanks, he raised the bowl with both hands to drink.

"The timing makes sense." Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan. "After Bai Cha's death, Amur took control of the Scorpions and categorized them as Black and White. White Scorpions infiltrated Great Zhou and passed him information, such as the military maps of Zhongbo. During the reign of Xiande, when Juexi was struck by natural disaster, Hai Liangyi dug into the account books and called for Hua Siqian to be held responsible. To make up for the treasury's deficit, Hua Siqian asked officials from the complicit noble clans for money."

"But he didn't get it," Shen Zechuan said heavily. "Hua Siqian sold the Hua Clan's fields and houses to Xi Hongxuan during the third year of Xiande precisely because he couldn't collect the money he needed from the noble-clan officials. The deficit was simply too large; the Hua Clan had no way of making up for it."

"Then Zhongbo's troops were defeated." Xiao Chiye frowned.

The route the Biansha Horsemen had taken was deeply ingrained in Xiao Chiye's memory. He and Shen Zechuan had once analyzed it, what seemed like long ago now, in the library of Plum Blossom Manor. Back then, they had surmised that the Biansha Horsemen had been aiming for Juexi. But if there were really White Scorpions lurking within the noble clans, Amur should have known that Juexi's granaries were empty.

Silently, Xiao Chiye drew several strokes on the ground with a branch. After a moment he said, "Juexi is hard to defend. It was a risk for Amur's cavalry to penetrate so far into the empire. Their advantage at the time was in how they fed their men on the spoils of war; they didn't attempt to hold the cities. If their goal was Juexi, this route was a straight path to their own demise. They would have ended up facing a three-way siege there."

"What if the colluding officials from the noble clans wanted Amur dead?" Shen Zechuan covered the military sketch Xiao Chiye drew with a hand and continued, "There was no one in Great Zhou to hold them in check, and Amur had no real power over them. They wanted to treat Amur like they treated Shen Wei—like a dog. If they lured Amur deep into Great Zhou and wiped out his cavalry with the combined power of three armies, this would turn the case from one of military defeat into one of Shen Wei's treason."

"But if that was their aim, then the noble clans couldn't have been aware of the existence of the White Scorpions." Enlightened, Xiao Chiye tossed away the branch. "They thought they could manipulate Amur."

Both players in this game had their own goals and their own ulterior motives. Perhaps Amur had pretended to be a fool from Biansha; he'd never revealed the card up his sleeve, and the noble clans had never realized there were spies already hiding among them. Amur had seized the opportunity and invaded Zhongbo. It went just as he'd planned. What he desired was not a single victory in battle, but to instigate the empire's complete collapse from within.

And he'd succeeded.

The fall of Zhongbo was the tipping point that put a definitive end to the revitalization of the empire during the reign of Yongyi. Starting from the fourth year of Xiande, the Zhou empire saw a series of radical upheavals. Hai Liangyi embarked on a path of openly opposing the noble clans. Together with Xue Xiuzhuo, he launched an investigation into Hua Siqian that lasted six years. Libei was forced to send Xiao Chiye to Qudu as a hostage, sowing the seeds for his later rebellion. As for the empress dowager, she had already cleared the imperial court of many who opposed her during the Guangcheng Emperor's reign. With everyone so deeply mired in internal strife, the fall of Zhongbo became the pebble Amur used to test the path ahead. Perhaps he had not expected the great empire's collapse to come so soon, but this pebble had hit right on the mark—it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"We thought Shen Wei killed Bai Cha." Haerigu piped up again in the solemn atmosphere. "The survivors of the original bandits likely influenced him—they poisoned his mind until he saw Bai Cha as a spy from Biansha."

Shen Zechuan dropped his gaze to his right hand and stilled in contemplation.

"But if that's the truth," Xiao Chiye pointed out, "Shen Wei didn't collude with the enemy. In that case, his actions during the reign of Xiande make no sense."

There was no scouring Shen Wei's guilt clean. He had cowered from battle, then joined hands with his lawful son, Shen Zhouji, to hold a banquet at which they strangled General Tantai Long—who wished to fight on—to death. He did more than save his own hide: He made his generals retreat alongside him. He had handed the six prefectures over on a silver platter, and it was this that Xiao Chiye most despised about him.

When Xiao Chiye had taken command of the Imperial Army, he had gone out of his way to take the remaining soldiers from the Zhongbo garrison troops under his command. Why? Because it was far too humiliating. These soldiers had suffered the infamy of fleeing before the enemy. Thirty thousand men died in the Chashi Sinkhole without a chance to fight back. On the day Xiao Chiye recruited Tantai Hu, he had said—*the wrongs suffered by our families have yet to be avenged, and the humiliation*

of our nation has yet to be redressed. He wanted to return the soldiers of Zhongbo to Zhongbo.

He who is owed a debt should collect it himself.

"No, it's the other way around," Shen Zechuan muttered as Shen Wei's face flashed again in his mind. "It only makes sense if you reverse everything."

Haerigu looked back at him in puzzlement.

The voices of the merchants next door had quieted. Under the desolate moonlight, Xiao Chiye draped Shen Zechuan's cloak over his shoulders.

"If the noble clans didn't know of the White Scorpions, then they would have had to approach Amur through some other means." Shen Zechuan gathered the cloak around him. "There were three places where they could reach Amur—Libei, the Bianjun Commandery, and Duanzhou. I once interrogated Ji Lei, back in Qudu. He said Shen Wei was sent to Zhongbo because the noble clans wanted him to become an obstacle between Libei and Qidong. But perhaps he wasn't merely sent there to play watchdog. Perhaps he was also sent to treat with the Biansha tribes on behalf of the noble clans."

Haerigu's blood ran cold. "Then—wouldn't that mean he married Bai Cha with an ulterior motive?"

Shen Zechuan swiftly organized his thoughts and laid them out methodically. "Zhu allowed the bandits to move in and out of Duanzhou as they pleased. Women like your mother in Dengzhou suffered greatly because of this; there must have also been victims in Dunzhou. Dunzhou and Duanzhou are so close. There's no way Tantai Long was in the dark about the bandits' trafficking of women. Ever since you mentioned Zhu's forging of household registrations, I've been thinking. Zhu was a minor official at the frontier; how could he alter the Yellow Register far away in Qudu? He must have had backers—people Tantai Long couldn't touch. Shen Wei came to Zhongbo to conspire with Zhu, and he went to Duanzhou to investigate the network Bai Cha had concealed."

This was the piece that had baffled Shen Zechuan earlier. If Bai Cha had been able to pull the wool over her own husband's eyes, then it made no sense that the bandits in Dunzhou could have traced her so easily. She had married Shen Wei to put an end to the banditry, and Shen Wei's deployment of troops to eradicate the bandits was part of his investigation into Bai Cha.

Before his death, there was one more thing Ji Lei had mentioned.

Shen Wei and Ji Lei had acted on the empress dowager's orders to frame the crown prince and the Eastern Palace. They had slit the crown prince's throat at the Temple of Guilt. Not long after, Shen Wei noticed spies everywhere around his manor and footsteps always on the roof. He couldn't sleep for fear that, having outlived his usefulness, the empress dowager would dispose of him. He had bribed Pan Rugui with a huge sum of money and was subsequently sent to Zhongbo.

"Shen Wei feared death. He suspected the noble clans saw him as a pawn to be discarded, so along with helping the noble clans contact the Biansha tribes, Shen Wei also went to Zhongbo to seek a way out for himself. He wavered between the noble clans and Biansha—until Amur appeared."

Shen Zechuan's eyes were dark. "*Shen Wei* was the Scorpion."

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Chapter 181:
Ce’an

SHEN WEI AND BAI CHA were husband and wife for quite a few years. They were strange bedfellows who shared the same pillow but nurtured different dreams and worked to different ends, all while wondering whom the other person really was. Throughout those years, Shen Wei often cautioned himself against compassion. When they were blessed with a son, Bai Cha selected Zechuan—*to nourish the rivers*—from among the many exquisite gems of names. They did as custom dictated and held a banquet. Not the slightest trace of murderous intent could be found in their eyes when they looked at each other before their guests. It was as though they were really in love.

Shen Wei was himself a child of common birth, born of a concubine. He had endured his share of indignity in the past and had ultimately walked out of it to become a blade of the noble clans. He fancied himself sharp, and to prove his loyalty, he dared kill even the crown prince. But he soon discovered the futility of his efforts, for he was cast aside once again, scorned by the powerful officials of the noble clans. He was a nobody, struggling on the far side of the natural chasm between them.

Sometimes, as Shen Wei sat in the courtyard and watched Bai Cha play with their son under the eaves, he allowed himself to imagine that the two of them were a perfect match, made for each other. There were moments when Shen Wei lost himself in the thought. The expression in Bai Cha’s eyes was utterly sincere, so much so that he really thought he was the man Bai Cha admired when she fixed that gaze upon him.

But these were all shadows of the past, fleeting and ephemeral.

Shen Wei never denied that he was scum. He couldn’t stand to be a tame dog for the rest of his life, and Bai Cha was just another chain. When Shen Wei once again stood at the fork in the road, he hesitated only a breath before ending her life.

He was a blade—one who eventually gored himself bloody.

Shen Zechuan resembled Bai Cha far too much—Shen Wei itched to kill him. He told himself they were not father and son; this child was merely a testament to an insignificant relationship. Shen Wei saw the evidence of his own guilt in Shen Zechuan's eyes, and this made the boy's gaze on him unbearable. But in the end, though the thought of throwing Shen Zechuan to a pack of wolves crossed his mind more than once, Shen Wei did not kill the boy.

This was the son of Shen Wei and Bai Cha. He had two strains of cold, detached blood coursing through his veins. As if celebrating this fact, Shen Wei drank at that banquet with all his heart. He kept this son, then tossed him out. He taught Shen Zechuan nothing. This was his revenge.

The object of his revenge was Bai Cha, and it was also himself.

"But…" Chen Yang broke the silence, asking carefully, "If Shen Wei became a Scorpion before Zhongbo's fall, why would he have set himself on fire? He accomplished his mission the moment the Biansha Horsemen set foot in Dunzhou. His only chance of survival was to follow Amur east."

This was a mystery Shen Zechuan had never solved. It was also the reason he'd initially found Ji Lei's story unbelievable. He hadn't the slightest clue—he did not understand Shen Wei. "This I don't know," he admitted. "If the Prince of Jianxing's manor was still standing, perhaps we could find some clues there."

"How many of you are there?" Xiao Chiye asked Haerigu.

"I can't say." On seeing Xiao Chiye's expression, Haerigu deflated and said, "Eight hundred. No more. There were over a thousand in those first few years, but it isn't easy to live a life in hiding. Many of them drifted away, one after another."

"Before, you stole Lei Jingzhe's military supplies and gear," Shen Zechuan said, "but you sent them back to Dunzhou."

Under the eyes of the guards, Haerigu slowly raised his hands and said innocently, "I have no land. I live in a small alley in Dunzhou. Such weapons are too large for me to hide. We have only eight hundred men."

But this wasn't what the eight hundred of you thought when you stole the equipment, Gu Jin thought.

"My mother used to say," Haerigu said in all seriousness, "that everything must return to its rightful owner. That gear didn't belong to me to begin with."

Xiao Chiye mercilessly exposed Haerigu: "Maybe just say things you have no idea how to use must return to their rightful owner."

Haerigu's expression seemed to say *that's exactly it*.

"What did Yan Heru offer you to win your loyalty?" As soon as Shen Zechuan cocked his head, Xiao Chiye knew he was ready to start negotiations.

"He's good-looking," Haerigu said sincerely.

Shen Zechuan found this Biansha Scorpion rather adept at dissimulation. He appeared gullible and easily deceived, but was sly in truth.

"And why do you want to throw in your lot with me instead?" Shen Zechuan asked.

"Some promises," Haerigu said. "I was once the recipient of Bai Cha's kindness, so I'm willing to trust you. For this reason—"

"I'll give you one more chance." Shen Zechuan held up a finger and spoke in what on another man might be called a gentle manner.

After a moment of silence, Haerigu answered honestly. "I want land—a piece of land those like me can call our own."

"What will you offer me in exchange?" Shen Zechuan drawled. "I'm not particularly in need of your eight hundred men."

"We're all indebted to your mother." Haerigu said, "You can regard us as elite soldiers."

"Bai Cha was Bai Cha," Shen Zechuan said. "I've shown neither you nor your people any kindness."

"Feelings can be fostered." Haerigu raised his hands again and said solemnly to Xiao Chiye, "I'm speaking only of gratitude. Shen Zechuan is

Bai Cha's son. For this reason alone, I am willing to put myself at your disposal."

"And if I were Yan Heru," Shen Zechuan said with thick sarcasm, "I'd believe you."

Haerigu had been able to go toe to toe with Lei Jingzhe in Dunzhou thanks to Yan Heru's financial assistance. He was still alive today because he was smart, and smart people rarely brought old ties into any new equation; they had their priorities clearly worked out. If Dunzhou hadn't fallen into Shen Zechuan's hands, Haerigu would never have remembered all this gratitude for Bai Cha—the man he had gone to such great lengths to save on Fuxian Peak had been Yan Heru.

"My wife is so smart." Xiao Chiye's praise was heartfelt.

Exposed, Haerigu was forced to switch tactics. "You killed Lei Jingzhe and foiled Amur's deployment in Zhongbo. He won't give up on the six prefectures easily. Very soon, his cavalry will converge outside the city of Duanzhou. If you want to hold Dunzhou, you'll need to reinforce the city walls as fast as possible. Even then, Dunzhou has no garrison troops, so you'll have to transfer a portion of Cizhou's here. But Cizhou is also under threat from Qudu. You *do* need men—you need troops."

"I may lack troops, but I do not lack money." Shen Zechuan said, "I'll station my men in Dunzhou. They will reestablish order here and swiftly reorganize the garrison troops."

"Can regular troops resist the elite forces of Biansha?" Haerigu countered. "Perhaps your…husband has a better understanding."

A dark light flashed in Xiao Chiye's eyes, but he continued the conversation without pause. "Hassen is leading the elite forces of Biansha on the front lines in the north, and the forces in the south face Qi Zhuyin. Amur has no more elite forces to deploy to Zhongbo."

"This is just a diversion." Haerigu's tone was firm. "The southern front is a difficult one. Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass secure the borders of Qidong. Qi Zhuyin can deploy a hundred twenty thousand troops from the Bianjun Commandery to fight the Biansha Horsemen. As long as Qi Zhuyin herself remains in Bianjun, the Horsemen will never break

through her defenses. Amur is only stretching the line of battle so far to confuse the Libei Cavalry. His true goal is Zhongbo.”

That, at least, was truth. It had also been Xiao Chiye’s guess.

Amur had established a unit of Scorpions, yet he’d hidden them in Zhongbo instead of putting them to immediate use on the northern battlefield in a bid to catch his foes off guard. Lei Jingzhe had led them to quietly occupy Dunzhou, which would also allow the Biansha Horsemen to swiftly ambush the southernmost Libei camps.

Hassen would be transferred to Zhongbo—this was what Xiao Chiye had suspected.

When Hassen departed the front line in Libei, the Scorpion unit would take his place. The Libei Armored Cavalry must think of a way to resist those iron hammers before this happened. At the same time, Shen Zechuan had to shore up Zhongbo’s defenses before Hassen struck, or they would both fall prey to Biansha’s onslaught.

Shen Zechuan ended the night’s discussion. “Before I leave Dunzhou, I want to meet your eight hundred men. We’ll discuss anything else after that.”

Shen Zechuan laid his head against Xiao Chiye’s chest amid the cool evening breeze. The poultice on his right hand had been replaced, and the hand rebandaged by Xiao Chiye’s careful fingers. As they climbed into bed, he wrapped one hand protectively around Shen Zechuan’s wrist.

Neither of them spoke, as though they had both fallen asleep.

Xiao Chiye stroked the back of Shen Zechuan’s head with his free hand, staring at the ceiling as he mulled over what they’d learned.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes. “The profits Yan Heru made selling grain in Zhongbo were gotten off the misery of the people. He can make reparations by covering the cost of the warm winter clothes Libei lacks this year.”

“Planning to squeeze him dry?” Releasing his wrist, Xiao Chiye reached up to cup Shen Zechuan’s cheeks and whispered, “Lanzhou.”

“We can transport the merchants’ wares we seized here to the trade market this winter and sell them to the Huiyan tribe.” Shen Zechuan gazed at Xiao Chiye, just inches away. “And after this winter, our trade route will be fully functional.”

“Then it looks like I’ll have to wait until next year for you to marry me.” Xiao Chiye laughed.

“That’s too long,” Shen Zechuan replied softly. “I’ll ask the Prince of Libei for your hand during the Spring Festival this year.”

They shared a silent kiss. Shen Zechuan sank into Xiao Chiye’s arms, and Xiao Chiye turned and pressed his brow to Shen Zechuan’s. Enveloped by his gaze, Shen Zechuan reached out to caress Xiao Chiye’s cheek.

With the case of Zhongbo’s fall now largely unraveled, the primary challenge Shen Zechuan faced was not the threat of the Biansha Horsemen from the east, but the overarching question of how he could rationally advance under the stain of Shen Wei’s name. As long as it was Shen Zechuan’s banner flying above his troops, Zhongbo’s defeat would remain a shackle.

“When I was a child in Duanzhou, I thought when I grew up, I would take on Shifu’s family name and become a Ji. Then I’d be a squad commander in Duanzhou, just like my dage.” Shen Zechuan let his fingers glide along Xiao Chiye’s collar; he was like captured moonlight as he lay in Xiao Chiye’s arms. “But later, while I was in the Temple of Guilt, I realized even if I changed my name, I would still be Shen Wei’s son.”

Shen Zechuan’s face bore a striking resemblance to Bai Cha’s; outwardly, all traces of Shen Wei had been erased by his mother. But those traces still lay concealed deep within him, manifesting as a kind of insanity. If Shen Zechuan hadn’t met Qi Huilian after crawling out of the Chashi Sinkhole, perhaps he would be even more uncontrollable. What his teacher had imparted to Shen Zechuan was not merely the Confucian classics. He had also bestowed upon him the name *Lanzhou*. The young man named Lanzhou had stepped out of Shen Wei’s shadow—this was a part of him that genuinely belonged to himself alone. It allowed him to retain his sanity, preventing his unending battles with the nightmares of the Chashi Sinkhole

from incinerating him utterly. And it was precisely because of this that Xiao Chiye could succeed in becoming Shen Zechuan's lock—the sheath that held Shen Zechuan at bay.

"When I was a child, all I wanted was to fly." Xiao Chiye idly flicked a finger at Shen Zechuan's forehead. "I wondered why Xiao Fangxu had to be my old man. He used to toss us into the air all day long, and he was so tall and strong to boot."

Shen Zechuan laughed.

"Everyone says I resemble my old man." Xiao Chiye met Shen Zechuan's eyes. "When I was sent to Qudu, I thought it was a punishment because I had been too complacent with our similarity. In Qudu, I wanted to strip off the part of me that belonged to Libei. I never told anyone this, but I hated the courtesy name Ce'an back then. *Striving for peace*—set against Chiye, *galloping through the wild*, it felt like a fetter on my talons and fangs. I drank the best wines with Li Jianheng, but I couldn't sleep at night. Even with my eyes open, dreams of the Hongyan Mountains haunted me."

During that time of restless torture, even Xiao Chiye hadn't known whom he should hate. He knew his father and brother weren't at fault, so he could only hate himself. When Shen Zechuan had looked at Xiao Chiye, he'd seen an untouchable mirage far beyond his reach. Yet when Xiao Chiye had looked at Shen Zechuan, he'd found him to be a reflection of the moon in water that lay just below his fingertips. Only Shen Zechuan understood his pain. Only Shen Zechuan's eyes alleviated the frustration that taunted him without cease. Even back then, he had already wanted to possess Shen Zechuan.

"You may be Shen Wei's son," Xiao Chiye whispered, "but you're mine."

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Chapter 182:
Quail

THE MERCHANTS had been locked in the courtyard for two days. Going without food and water was bad enough, but it was the lack of latrines and chamber pots that proved most intolerable. When they truly couldn't hold it any longer, they considered climbing over the walls to get out. Fei Sheng, as it turned out, had prepared for this. He instructed his men to stand guard atop the walls to douse those who tried with buckets of cold water, sparking yet another uproar in the courtyard.

"The fuck is this?! What's wrong with you?! You nearly made me piss my pants!"

Fei Sheng had sat before the gates until his buttocks were aching. He stood and paced several steps. "Piss, huh? You're the one reeking of it. Not my problem."

The merchants all held up their pants, their legs shaking from the urgency of their need. The man with the pipe who'd taken the lead earlier pressed himself to the crack in the door and swallowed his pride to plead. "My good sir, surely all men must answer the call of nature! Is this not extorting a confession?!"

Fei Sheng moved closer to the door and exclaimed in astonishment, "What are you accusing me of? I haven't laid a finger on you!"

The man pressed his legs together, doubled over with discomfort. "Yes, yes, yes. But you have to let us use the latrine!"

"I think I've made myself clear." Fei Sheng's smile was all teeth. "You can come out any time; just write down the names of the officials who supplied you with the illegal goods."

These merchants were not natives of Zhongbo; after concluding their business here, they still had to return to their hometowns. Who among them was brazen enough to offend the local officials? They refused to write; Fei Sheng refused to unseal the door. Truly cornered, they had no choice but to

endure the shame of pulling down their pants to relieve themselves. This was fine for a while, but as the foul stench of urine permeated the courtyard, their situation became unbearable. The scent was so overwhelming they all covered their noses; after two days of this, they finally caved and confessed everything.

Chest puffed with success, Fei Sheng handed the list to Shen Zechuan. If there were any White Scorpions among these local officials, Shen Zechuan intended to find them. The transportation of so many goods east would have inevitably left a trail.

Yan Heru, starved into obedience, sat cross-legged and docile before Shen Zechuan. After waiting some time, and seeing Shen Zechuan had no intention to speak, he asked, “Your Lordship, aren’t you going to interrogate me?”

Shen Zechuan set the list before Yan Heru. “All the names here are your associates, yes?”

“I’m a businessman—businessmen like me have nothing to do with the local yamen.” Yan Heru tilted his head as he scanned the list of names. “These are just a few drinking buddies.”

“If you simply wanted to do business, your home prefecture of Hezhou would be most convenient, yet you set up a small trade market all the way out in Dunzhou, drawing merchants from far and wide.” Having slept well last night, Shen Zechuan was unusually refreshed this morning and more than happy to talk in circles with Yan Heru. “Quite an interesting tactic.”

Yan Heru blinked. “Just the usual tricks to get by in business. Your Lordship is the real visionary here. Let’s set aside your route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou—it makes me green with envy even thinking about it. Now that Dunzhou is under your control too, I can make my living under you. I’m ready and willing to call myself your younger brother.”

“Why don’t you answer my questions before we talk about swearing brotherhood?” Shen Zechuan said. “These local officials embezzled

government goods and entrusted them to the merchants for transport here, where they sold these items to the Biansha tribes—through your shop—and laundered them into ready silver. A righteous young man indeed, leading so many into making their fortune off state wealth they've handed to our enemy."

"You're smart." Yan Heru folded his hands behind his back and finally stopped beating around the bush. "That's it in a nutshell. It's through the tea trade that my Yan Clan made its fortune. We spent several mountains' worth of silver bribing local officials just to survive under the watchful eye of the Xi Clan, but no amount could fill that bottomless pit. Those government rats in charge of the copper and iron mines could line their pockets to bursting. They only had to hold out their hands, and tens of thousands of taels would pour in. Anyone would be tempted! So I figured I might as well join the rat race."

Yan Heru spoke with no sign of fear. Any business he had ever conducted was a capital crime punishable by execution if he was reported to the authorities. But he'd still gone ahead with it all, and even become a seasoned hand.

"I'm not the one providing Amur with copper and iron." Yan Heru's smile was so wide it showed his canines. "Your Lordship is interrogating me today because you've realized the piddling amounts recorded in the books are incapable of meeting the needs of the Scorpions' equipment, right?"

Shen Zechuan was silent.

"All transactions that pass through my hands are recorded there in black and white. Your Lordship, after all this poking around, you must know I'm telling the truth." Feeling his legs going numb, Yan Heru shifted in place. "I'll have you know that the first person who came to Zhongbo to deal in grain wasn't me, but Xi Hongxuan."

After Xi Hongxuan's death, all the Xi Clan's shops had fallen into Shen Zechuan's hands. This was the reason Ge Qingqing remained in Juexi even now: to keep a tight watch on the Xi Clan's steward, Xi Dan. Shen Zechuan knew the Xi Clan's accounts like the back of his hand, and he was

aware Xi Hongxuan had sold grain in Zhongbo after the fourth year of Xiande, although he began to sell directly to the Yan clan by the fifth year of Xiande. But even after going through the Xi Clan's accounts with a fine-tooth comb back then, Shen Zechuan had never found any traces of copper or iron trading between Xi Hongxuan and the Biansha tribes.

"The troops' defeat didn't change the fact that Zhongbo is the only place you can easily ferry goods to Amur," Yan Heru said. "Zhongbo's stood defenseless since the fourth year of Xiande, yet Amur never made another move here. By now, it should have already dawned on Your Lordship why this was the case, right?"

To transport supplies.

After the fourth year of Xiande, not a single one of the provincial administration commissioners Qudu deployed to Zhongbo had lasted long. The administrators had changed over and over again. Initially, Shen Zechuan had thought the severity of the banditry was to blame, but upon arrival in Zhongbo, he'd quickly learned this was not the case. At the very least, Lei Jingzhe couldn't have been so influential early on. Afterward, Shen Zechuan recalled how thorough Hai Liangyi had been in his efforts to transfer Jiang Qingshan to Zhongbo after becoming Grand Secretary. He'd had Jiang Qingshan reside in Qudu temporarily while waiting for confirmation of his appointment, all so he could send Jiang Qingshan to Zhongbo to finally turn things around.

"I really do want to work with Your Lordship," Yan Heru said. "Come on, let's do this together."

Shen Zechuan was in no hurry to give him an answer. "Hezhou was still transporting grain to Qudu as of last year." He looked at Yan Heru. "You have money and grain. Why aren't you throwing in with Xue Xiuzhuo? He's working with an equally powerful ally in Juexi—Jiang Qingshan. There's no reason for Xue Xiuzhuo to let you run around unchecked."

Yan Heru's smile faded. "I would love to, but that man wants my head."

"Xue Xiuzhuo is checking your accounts?"

“Not just mine! He’s also looking into the Xi Clan’s accounts,” Yan Heru said. “That man is fearsome. He won’t tolerate any corruption, and he doesn’t value friendship at *all*.”

Yan Heru was reluctant to deal with people like Xue Xiuzhuo for one very simple reason—he was afraid of him. Back in the reign of Xiande, when Xue Xiuzhuo was still serving as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, Yan Heru had once attempted to bribe him. It had proved more than futile: Xue Xiuzhuo not only rejected the bribe, he was almost successful in tracing the money back to Yan Heru’s shops.

The way Yan Heru formed alliances was simple: Everyone transgressed together, giving everyone mutual leverage over each other.

Shen Zechuan lapsed back into silence.

Watching him, Yan Heru anxiously craned his neck. “Do we have a deal? We can draft the plan right now. Shares in the trade market’s business in Libei, and the Huaizhou-Cizhou-Chazhou route, along with finer details of the operation can all be discussed. I can also deliver grain to Libei.”

“The terms are up for discussion. As long as you procure the remaining winter clothes for the Libei Armored Cavalry before the tenth month.” Shen Zechuan set the lid over the teacup. “And Hezhou assumes the responsibility of supplying the granaries in Chazhou and Dunzhou at the start of spring next year.”

“Can you establish yourself as king in Zhongbo by spring next year? I think not. My grain in Hezhou is still subject to requisition by Qudu, and I’ll have to send it to Qidong as military provisions.” The abacus in Yan Heru’s mind was clicking away. “Qi Zhuyin is the grand marshal of Qidong’s five commanderies, and she’s just on the other side of Hezhou’s border. I have no troops to stop her. When she doesn’t get the provisions she expects, I’m the one she’ll come after. And that would be fine if it was just me, but Cizhou will be in a tough spot if the governor is implicated.”

Shen Zechuan knew Yan Heru had his own schemes in mind. “What’s your point?”

Yan Heru's eyes lit up. "How about this? Come spring next year, Hezhou and Cizhou will both supply the granaries of Chazhou and Dunzhou. I'll supply the lion's share. Isn't that honorable of me? As for Qidong, I'll personally head to Baimazhou in Juexi via the western waterways to purchase their provisions. I've a few old friends there. But it's too expensive to bribe my way through all the checkpoints—I'd have to start getting the money for it now. How about Your Lordship waives the tariffs for merchants who've registered at the Yan Clan's brokerage and lets them sell their wares at the trade market in Libei? The Huiyan tribe has tea; if I buy it up north and resell at the Port of Yongyi, I can make a killing."

Having drunk his fill of tea, Shen Zechuan rose to his feet and made to leave without another word.

"Hang on!" Yan Heru scrambled after him. "This won't do either? Your Lordship, don't be stingy! If you want to shear my wool, you have to let me fill my stomach first."

Shen Zechuan strode out the door. At the same moment, Xiao Chiye happened to enter from the round moon gate.

Yan Heru fell to the ground and shamelessly created a scene. "Don't go, Shen-gege! You're my dear brother! We can talk it over, please!"

Shen Zechuan looked at him askance. "It's thanks to you that bandits are running rampant in Chazhou, Dunzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou. Since the fifth year of Xiande, the Yan Clan has gotten fat off the misfortune of Zhongbo. I'm already being more than considerate in not shutting the Yan Clan's shops down for good. If anyone in Chazhou or Dunzhou starves to death at the start of spring next year, I'll have your head for it."

Yan Heru cowered back, shrinking into himself like a quail. As he lay on the ground, he saw Xiao Chiye's boots through the curtain Fei Sheng had lifted. He suddenly had a stroke of inspiration and shouted, "Wait—I still have some treasures!"

Xiao Chiye rapped his umbrella on the step. "What treasures? Show this prize to your second young master too."

"What second young master?" Yan Heru asked with an ingratiating smile. "It's second *master*! The second master liked pearls and jades back in

Qudu, no? I just so happened to get my hands on some quality stuff at the start of autumn. As the saying goes, a precious sword ought to be gifted to a great hero; only the finest gems are a fit gift for the rare second master. I've been wanting to show my respect for some time!"

Xiao Chiye had been hoping to make Shen Zechuan a few more earrings, so his interest was piqued. He let Fei Sheng continue holding the curtain as he asked, "What kind of gems?"

Yan Heru knew the relationship between Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan was an intimate one. On Fuxian Peak, Shen Zechuan had said *my husband*. He couldn't convince Shen Zechuan, but he could try to coax Xiao Chiye, so he said, "When I get out of here, I'll have my men bring them over to your manor for your perusal."

"A sensible lad, this one." Xiao Chiye seemed to be in quite a good mood.

Yan Heru nodded his head as vigorously as though he were pounding garlic. "The second master came with the prefectural governor on official business. You've been staying on my property for days now, yet I haven't played the role of a good host. It shames me to think of it."

Eyeing Xiao Chiye as he stood on the stairs, Yan Heru secretly smacked his lips as he marveled at how tall Xiao Er was. His shoulders were so broad one could roll around on them.

"What was it that you called the prefectural governor earlier?" Xiao Chiye inquired.

"Shen-gege," Yan Heru replied.

Xiao Chiye's tone abruptly went cold. "Get him out of here. Let him clear his mind in the pond. To think he even forgot who his parents and siblings are."

Fei Sheng leaned over to hoist Yan Heru over his shoulder and headed out.

Yan Heru had no idea what he'd done to displease Xiao Chiye again. He kicked his legs and blurted, "I remember, I remember! Second Master, don't throw me in the pond!" The wind was freezing outside. Yan Heru

continued in a panic, “There’s something I have yet to tell the second master. You—”

But Fei Sheng had already tossed him into the water.

Five days later, Shen Zechuan departed for Cizhou, while Tantai Hu remained in Dunzhou. Around the same time, Shen Zechuan’s letter finally reached the camps of the Bianjun Commandery.

Qi Zhuyin stepped out of the tent. Upon seeing her deputy Qi Wei dismount from his horse with the missive, she asked, “Where did that letter come from?”

“From Zhongbo.” Qi Wei held it out. “It’s affixed with his personal seal.”

“Looks like Shen Zechuan is doing rather well for himself.” Qi Zhuyin opened the letter. “To think he’d remain alive long enough to send a letter my way.”

Although Qi Wei hadn’t looked at the letter without permission, he could guess its contents. As Qi Zhuyin read, he said, “It hasn’t been even half a year since he established the Cizhou Garrison Troops, yet they were able to defeat the Biansha Horsemen in Dunzhou. That’s impressive.”

“We have Xiao Er to thank for this.” Qi Zhuyin handed the letter back to Qi Wei and glanced up at the overcast sky. “The longer the Prince of Libei holds him back, the more zealous he’ll be when he finally steps onto the front lines.”

“After the new year, Qudu will want you to head north to suppress King Yi of Fanzhou,” Qi Wei said.

Qi Zhuyin didn’t respond. She whistled toward the soldiers behind them and grabbed her overcoat. Shrugging it on, she changed the subject. “Is my father well?”

“Five men have been tasked with taking turns attending to him, just as you asked,” Qi Wei answered, following a step behind Qi Zhuyin. “His concubines haven’t been allowed near. They’re none too pleased. They’ve been making a racket over at the mistress’s manor for days now.”

Qi Zhuyin had been about to mount her horse but stopped upon hearing this. “Third Lady Hua didn’t give them a lashing?”

Her deputy scratched his head. “She was raised as a princess; she isn’t as blunt as the rest of us. The way she speaks to those concubines is as gentle as can be.”

“Then she’s got a good temper.” Just thinking about the women in the inner courtyard gave Qi Zhuyin a headache. “The old man’s had a stroke and they’re acting like he’s about to breathe his last. All day long they’re clamoring about splitting the family properties; they’re even arguing about that damned golden chamber pot.”

“It’s because they’re scared of you,” Qi Wei said.

Qi Zhuyin was irate. “Do I not feed them?”

“Well,” Qi Wei replied awkwardly, “you’ve been watching their accounts and deducting their rouge allowance.”

To that, Qi Zhuyin had no retort.

This was a rotten debt. For the past several years, Qi Zhuyin had drained her personal funds dry to make up for the shortfall in salaries and provisions for the Qidong Garrison Troops. Four of the commanderies could rely on their garrison troops cultivating the land to help mitigate this burden, and in the years there was no war, their granaries were abundant. But the Bianjun Commandery couldn’t do the same. Lu Guangbai had exhausted his family fortune for the troops in Bianjun, and Qi Zhuyin had spent through her dowry. Half a year ago, when the military provisions for the Bianjun Commandery were found rotten, Qi Zhuyin had borrowed money from merchants to make up the difference. She had initially saved enough to pay off the debt, but her father’s wedding had taken place soon after. To marry Hua Xiangyi into the family with all pomp and circumstance, the Qi Clan’s finances had been utterly exhausted.

The sum of money these concubines spent every month was alarming. Their expenditure on rouge and powder alone amounted to tens of thousands of taels. But in cutting their allowance, Qi Zhuyin had well and truly stirred the hornet’s nest. Her father’s concubines were a sobbing mess in the inner courtyard, all of them baying their complaints to Qi Shiyu.

Qi Wei knew Qi Zhuyin was in a difficult spot. “What if we discussed it with the mistress? Her dowry—”

Qi Zhuyin cast a sharp glance over, and Qi Wei, aware he had spoken out of turn, immediately sank to his knees.

Without looking at him again, Qi Zhuyin mounted her horse. “Send Hongying home; say it’s on my orders. If anyone dares get rough with the third lady, tell her not to hesitate—have them tied up and sent directly to me. She didn’t come all the way to Qidong to help pay my bills or be a punching bag for my father’s concubines. She has Qi Shiyu’s name plastered all over her, and she’s the rightful mistress of Qidong I traversed eight hundred li to welcome. Disrespecting her is the same as disrespecting my old man. For the sake of our name, they better not get any ideas about that little lady, you hear me?”

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Chapter 183:
Inseparable as Fish and Water

JI GANG HAD BEEN feeling lonely at home with Shen Zechuan far away on his trip and Ding Tao and Li Xiong both absent. He had nothing to do most days but brew a little tea and take a stroll with his bird. His culinary skills were exemplary, so he looked after Yao Wenyu on Shen Zechuan's behalf. He was nothing if not meticulous, and in half a month, the color began to return to Yao Wenyu's cheeks.

When the weather was fine, Qiao Tianya accompanied Yao Wenyu out to bask in the sunlight; he had collected quite the number of old books, which Yao Wenyu often read in the courtyard.

As Yao Wenyu's mobility was limited, Qiao Tianya helped him wash before bed every night. At one point, Qiao Tianya had noticed the reddened tips of Yao Wenyu's ears while wiping him down and realized he had never once looked Qiao Tianya in the eye in the bathhouse. It was only in this moment that Qiao Tianya again caught a glimpse of the Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo he'd seen that spring.

They conversed very little.

Aside from voicing his thoughts during discussions, Yao Wenyu spent much of his time sitting in idleness. He kept vigil by the weiqi board, contemplating his next moves. It was not uncommon for him to hold a book for an entire day, closing the book for the night at the same page he had begun that morning. Even sleep did not come easily. His legs were not wholly numb; instead, they constantly ached. Only when Qiao Tianya played his qin did he feel a small measure of relief.

Falling asleep to the qin's murmurings felt to Yao Wenyu like sitting in a drizzle with his eyes closed.

These days, Qiao Tianya drank but rarely, and had shaved his stubble clean. He spent quite a bit of time reclining in his chair, feet outstretched and arms behind his head, staring out the window in a daze. In his occasional observations of him, Yao Wenyu found the sight of Qiao Tianya

set against the snowy mountains and dense fog beyond the window unspeakably tranquil. It was as if all the tempestuous vicissitudes of his previous life had been banished from his memory, turning him from a rootless wanderer into a pine beneath the moon.

Yao Wenyu never addressed him as Qiao Tianya; Qiao Tianya was someone who welcomed guests from afar and served with his life. But Yao Wenyu knew him as someone who laughed and cursed when tipsy, wielding his sword as he pleased, and when he sobered, he was a solitary shadow that emanated an aura of frost. They were like two broken pieces of jade coming together. Each made up for what the other lacked, and, in doing so, pieced back together those bygone days of free-spirited youth.

"Fanzhou has been quiet lately." Gao Zhongxiong sat by the fire and warmed his hands. "King Yi should have already gotten the news about Dunzhou. He must be on edge."

"The garrison troops have to pass north of Fanzhou on their return journey," Zhou Gui commented as he sipped his hot tea. "It's natural for him to be afraid."

"But I don't understand," Gao Zhongxiong said. "Fanzhou is surrounded by enemies on all sides. In King Yi's haste to establish himself under his own banner, it seems more like he's in a rush to court death."

"King Yi has named his rule of Fanzhou 'Great Yin.' He not only reordered the prefectural yamen but also brazenly scoured Fanzhou for beauties in the name of choosing consorts," Zhou Gui lamented. "Rather than saying he wants to join the fight for the imperial throne, it'd be more accurate to say he wants to make merry while he can."

When King Yi had first crowned himself, he hadn't expected Shen Zechuan to move so quickly. Shen Zechuan's control over Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou cut off all possibilities of expanding his territory northwest. He was less ruthless than Shen Zechuan and had less talented men under his command. He'd initially risen up in rebellion because he could no longer tolerate the bandits. The people he'd led were his neighbors down the street. Yet at present, the garrison commander he'd appointed was

a butcher, and his civil officials were all elderly gentry with petty concerns. All they brought up for discussion during the daily court sessions were matters like who snatched whose donkey and who committed adultery with whose husband.

“The prefectural governor said King Yi can’t fall yet,” Gao Zhongxiong replied. “We have to keep him alive until next year. King Yi knows he’s powerless to resist a real offensive; that’s why he wanted to ally with Lei Jingzhe. Now that Lei Jingzhe is dead, he’s been left high and dry. He ought to be shaking in his boots by now.”

“King Yi is not an iron shield,” Zhou Gui said. “We have to think of another way to deal with Qi Zhuyin. Yuanzhuo, what are your views on this?”

Yao Wenyu snapped back to his senses. Hot tea still in hand, he said, “My guess is Qi Zhuyin’s delay in moving to crush the rebels in Zhongbo is about more than Lu Guangbai’s desertion.”

Zhou Gui made a sound of surprise. “You think there’s some reason?”

“During the Hua-Qi wedding, the heir consort Lu Yizhi personally traveled to Qidong to deliver gifts for the purpose of taking her father back with her to Libei. Qi Zhuyin was willing to risk Qudu’s wrath to protect Lu Pingyan not only out of sentiment but also to show Libei her stance.” Warmth returned to Yao Wenyu’s fingers. “If Qi Zhuyin obeys Qudu’s command and heads north to quell the rebels in Zhongbo, she’ll be facing two battlefronts alone—one to the north and one to the east. If Qudu orders her to attack Libei once she recovers Zhongbo, Libei’s front line in the north will fall apart. Without the Libei Armored Cavalry, she will become the last line of defense in the east. All her troops will be deployed into battle, and the geographical advantage she enjoys in Qidong will vanish. Should that time come, it will be all she can do to grit her teeth and push on.”

Realization struck Gao Zhongxiong. “If it comes to that, then even if Qi Zhuyin is able to defeat Amur, she’ll have no strength or resources left to challenge Qudu.”

Yao Wenyu nodded. “The Qidong Garrison Troops are the backbone of Qi Zhuyin’s power. With these troops scattered or dead, Qudu will easily replace her.”

Zhou Gui sat dazed for a long moment before speaking. “The grand marshal is far-sighted indeed. Yuanzhuo, how did you come to this conjecture? Before the eighth month, when the prefectural governor was still here, we all thought Qi Zhuyin would come.”

“It was only after the wedding that I began to suspect it,” Yao Wenyu said. “Before that, the grand marshal put off heading north under the pretext that there was no one to guard the Bianjun Commandery, which in turn allowed the marquis to return to Libei. The empress dowager sent Han Cheng to escort the bride to Qidong in part to place pressure on Qi Zhuyin. But even after the wedding, the marshal remained in Bianjun without making a move.”

No matter how badly the empress dowager wanted Qi Zhuyin to deploy her troops, she had no more bargaining chips left. Her final trump card had been Hua Xiangyi, and she had played it. Who could have known Qi Shiyu would have a stroke? Thus this round was as good as forfeited. Everyone under the empress dowager’s command would now be secretly gnashing their teeth over the fact that Qi Zhuyin was not a man.

They were still chatting around the brazier when Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain and announced, “The prefectural governor has returned.”

Zhou Gui and Gao Zhongxiong promptly rose to their feet. Gao Zhongxiong reached for Yao Wenyu’s wheelchair but was a step too slow—Qiao Tianya beat him to it, taking the wheelchair with a natural ease to push Yao Wenyu through the curtain that had been lifted for them.

Fei Sheng had taken extreme care on the road, but the ninth month was right around the corner. Shen Zechuan couldn’t avoid the onslaught of cold even huddled up against Xiao Chiye. He fell ill again, this time with a fever so high it seemed to burn up whatever composure he’d possessed in Dunzhou.

The recruitment for the Dunzhou Garrison Troops was of utmost importance, and the advisors had been waiting in the study to speak of this all day. Even while tucked into bed, Shen Zechuan was still mulling over the matter.

“Hand the accounts from Dunzhou over to Yuanzhuo.” Cheeks slightly flushed and one palm over his eyes to shield them from the dim light, Shen Zechuan said, “Have Chengfeng assist. Draw up an estimate of the military expenses for Dunzhou tonight and send it over to Tantai Hu within two days at the latest.”

Raising a hand to block the light for him, Xiao Chiye combed his fingers through Shen Zechuan’s slightly damp hair to brush it aside. “I know.”

Shen Zechuan didn’t want Xiao Chiye to leave, but the business of the garrison troops was pressing, and the Biansha Horsemen would remain a menace so long as the situation in Duanzhou remained unclear. There could be no delays in establishing Dunzhou’s defenses. He peered at Xiao Chiye through half-lidded eyes. “Tell Qiao Tianya about the armguard; he’ll take care of it.”

Xiao Chiye hummed an acknowledgment and watched as Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. He waited a moment for Shen Zechuan’s breathing to even out before rising to change his clothes. As he walked down the steps, he said to Fei Sheng, “Wake the prefectural governor up when the medicine’s ready. Make sure he finishes it.”

Even after returning home to Cizhou, Fei Sheng had continued to keep close watch on the preparation of Shen Zechuan’s medicine. Fei Sheng walked alongside Xiao Chiye and accepted the order with a nod.

“If he’s awake when Shifu comes, invite him in. If not, ask Shifu to come back later.” Chen Yang came over to drape Xiao Chiye’s coat over his shoulders. While Xiao Chiye was putting it on, he said, “If Shifu asks what happened in Dunzhou, skip the part about Fuxian Peak. I’ll tell him about it myself later.”

Xiao Chiye paused and looked at the sky. “I’ll be back before it’s late.” He spoke without breaking his stride. “Remember to prepare some

candy when the medicine is ready. You can also try honeyed water…”

He hurried off before the words had fully left his mouth.

Upon arrival in the study, while everyone was still standing to pay their respects, Xiao Chiye took his seat and skipped all the formalities. As Yao Wenyu looked over the account books of the Yan Clan and Dunzhou, Kong Ling updated him with a detailed report on the situation.

Not a single one of the advisors dared smoke their pipes today as they sat straight-backed before Xiao Chiye. The marquis’ oppressive aura made it difficult for them to even lift their heads. They kept their reports concise and clear, not even daring to overdo the flattery.

The question of Dunzhou was a complicated one. The largest logistical hurdle lay in its rather substantial distance from Cizhou, along with the fact that Fanzhou lay between them. As a result, there was much that needed to be discussed in detail. Zhou Gui had assumed Xiao Chiye would be less familiar with the topography of Zhongbo than Shen Zechuan and called for someone to present a map. But he was quickly proven wrong —Xiao Chiye seemed to have Zhongbo’s map clearly imprinted in his mind from the time he had spent transporting military supplies all over Libei, and didn’t make a single mistake during the conversation; no one could find fault with him.

They lit the lamps in the study and discussed official business into the night, while back in his room, Shen Zechuan slipped between wakefulness and sleep.

Shen Zechuan woke when he heard Fei Sheng bring in the medicine. He drank the brew without even reaching for a candy and fell right back asleep. Fei Sheng closed the door and instructed the attendants serving in the courtyard to change their shoes. The maidservants, having taken off their pendants and hairpins, made no sound as they walked.

Perhaps it was because of the quiet that Shen Zechuan slept for a surprisingly long time. When he woke again, he heard movement outside the door and thought Xiao Chiye had returned. But Xiao Chiye did not come in, and Shen Zechuan fell back asleep. In the middle of the night, he was woken up by scalding heat, only to find Xiao Chiye sleeping soundly

atop him. Unable to move, Shen Zechuan remained pinned under him until he was drenched in sweat. Only when daybreak approached did he feel a little more rejuvenated.

Feebly, Shen Zechuan raised his hand to Xiao Chiye's back, only to come into contact with a piece of gauze. All traces of sleep promptly deserted him. Wide awake now, he struggled up to take a look, but Xiao Chiye pressed him back down.

"Hm?" Xiao Chiye buried his face in his chest and said in a voice heavy with sleep, "Need some water?"

Shen Zechuan felt along the bandage, his alarm intensifying the longer he touched.

Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's hand to stop him from groping blindly. "Watch where you're pressing. Ow."

They stared at each other for a moment, until Xiao Chiye suddenly wrapped his arms around Shen Zechuan, preventing him from moving.

Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye and asked slowly, "Didn't I say not to ask for a lashing?"

His illness had turned him thin and sallow; even his voice was hoarse. He looked as if his eyes were going to redden the next instant as he looked at Xiao Chiye in the dimness.

After the incident with Cai Yu in Chazhou, where Shen Zechuan had suffered a festering cut from a bandit's blade, Xiao Chiye had told Ji Gang to whip him each time Shen Zechuan was injured. Shen Zechuan had attempted to coax Xiao Chiye out of his anger in Dunzhou and been rather severely punished already, so he'd thought Xiao Chiye had let the matter go —who would have guessed he would act so quickly upon returning? In the short span of time Shen Zechuan had been sleeping, Xiao Chiye had already received his whipping.

Xiao Chiye set his forehead against Shen Zechuan's and pressed close; sensing that his fever had receded, Xiao Chiye hummed lazily. He remained this way, shoulder and arm bare, his back bandaged with several layers of gauze. Xiao Chiye had injured his right arm when he'd faced

Hassen at Tudalung Banner, and the wounds had left scars. Now, new scars overlapped with old, making his arm tingle with alternating numbness and pain.

Shen Zechuan felt those lashings as a physical ache. Even touching the gauze hurt him so much his fingers curled. Xiao Chiye crowded so close he felt breathless. He hated this man to death. But as he lay there, he only wanted to repeat over and over again:

He regretted it now.

Ding Tao sat under the eaves in low spirits, playing cat's cradle with Li Xiong. Noticing Ji Gang had been standing under the eaves for an hour, he tugged at a corner of his clothes and asked, "Grandpa Ji, why don't you sit?"

Mind still wandering, Ji Gang asked, "Did I hit him too hard?"

"Master was the one who requested it," Ding Tao comforted him. "The way he insisted, you could hardly refuse."

Ji Gang sat down, ill at ease. After a while, he stood up again. "I'd better go get some ointment."

Fei Sheng was waiting on the veranda. Spotting Ji Gang, he hurried over to greet him.

Ji Gang cast a glance at the principal room as though he wanted to say something, only to swallow back his words. He handed the ointment to Fei Sheng, and after thinking for a moment, asked, "Was the marquis also staying with Lanzhou when they were on official business in Dunzhou?"

Remembering Xiao Chiye's instructions, Fei Sheng maintained his composure and replied, "Yes. The marquis and Master are living examples of the confidants described in stories. They are like fish and water—inseparable from one another."

Seeing how frank and unperturbed Fei Sheng was, Ji Gang felt he was the one reading too much into it. As it was said, bosom friends were hard to find. What's more, Lanzhou and Xiao Er had faced death together.

For them to be far closer than normal was only to be expected—he couldn't think of any other reason for it.

Somehow, he still felt something wasn't quite right. But Ji Gang was reluctant to let his thoughts wander in that direction, and unwilling to make that kind of conjecture about Shen Zechuan. When Ji Mu was still alive, they had gone to propose marriage for him, and back then, Shen Zechuan had said that he also someday wanted a wife. Consequently, Hua Pingting had gone hunting for suitable maidens. She'd considered quite a number, all from small, modest families in their own neighborhood. Shen Zechuan would have only had to like a single one of them, and they would have gone to call on the family for a visit.

"Shifu?" Fei Sheng ventured.

Ji Gang clasped his hands behind his back. "Go on, keep watch here. I'll come back later."

He wanted to have another talk with Xiao Chiye, but Xiao Chiye was too busy, seemingly in a never-ending rush as he flew back and forth between their manor and Zhou Gui's. The dust in Dunzhou had scarcely settled when a letter came from Libei: The minute Shen Zechuan recovered from his illness, Xiao Chiye would have to depart for Border Camp.

"The winter coats will arrive in Libei in the ninth month. You can just dispatch someone to Border Camp to assist with their delivery." Shen Zechuan secured the armguard for Xiao Chiye. "Is it snowing heavily in Libei?"

"On and off," Xiao Chiye answered. "Most often it's sleet at the moment. The maintenance of the roads is the main thing. We have to make sure the paths are smooth and unobstructed by the time heavy snow descends in the eleventh month."

"Tell His Lordship we've already secured the military provisions for the beginning of spring next year." Shen Zechuan's hand slid down from the armguard to Xiao Chiye's palm. He looked up into his eyes and continued, "Construction on the road from Dunzhou to Border Camp will also start next year."

They needed to connect Zhongbo and Libei so Border Camp had direct access to Cizhou and Dunzhou. Information coming from Dunzhou especially had to be fast and up to date.

Xiao Chiye might not return for the next two months. He had to keep a constant eye on Libei's territory and be precise in his calculations of food and equipment reserves on the front lines. If heavy snow unexpectedly collapsed the roads or cut off access, a lack of supplies could make the winter arduous for those on the battlefield.

"If Ding Tao gets up to too much mischief, send him back to the homeland. My sister-in-law can deal with him."

As he spoke, Xiao Chiye lowered his head and took Shen Zechuan's hands, pulling him forward to step on the tops of his own feet. He slid his palm up to cradle the back of Shen Zechuan's head and stood with him to exchange a kiss.

The fabric of their clothes brushed together. Shen Zechuan leaned into Xiao Chiye's arms and melted into his scent.

Xiao Chiye loved the way Shen Zechuan tilted his head up when they stood like this. This was Shen Zechuan seeking him out, and all that pervaded the air when they touched was desire born of love. Right now he bore all of Shen Zechuan's weight; he could pick him up with ease. It began as a kiss, but Xiao Chiye only held him tighter as they entwined intimately, sharing their very breath.

"I've already asked Sister-in-Law to make arrangements," Xiao Chiye said. "I'll send Chen Yang down before the new year to bring you and Shifu to the homeland."

Shen Zechuan's breathing had gone ragged from the kiss. "I'll prepare a gift."

Silly Lanzhou.

He cupped Shen Zechuan's face and kissed him harder.

Xiao Chiye had arrived in a hurry and left in a hurry. On this overcast day in Cizhou, shrouded in fog, he braved the drizzle and rode north bearing fresh wounds from his whipping. For the moment, all was calm and

peaceful in these three prefectures of Zhongbo. Xiao Chiye had stationed Tantai Hu in Dunzhou, leaving him as a bulwark for Shen Zechuan.

Cizhou enjoyed a brief period of respite, and Shen Zechuan seemed to have dampened his brilliance and gone into a state of dormancy. But very quickly, Xue Xiuzhuo, far away in Qudu, came to learn how formidable this state of hibernation was.

During the Hanyi Festival at the start of the tenth month, when families burned paper clothes to keep their deceased ancestors warm, Chazhou hosted a grand banquet with funding from the Yan Clan. Its host invited talents the world over. It didn't matter whether the person was a distinguished scholar from the countryside or a reclusive statesman from a bustling city; as long as they were academically accomplished, they received the invitation to participate in a discourse between men of letters.

Had the host been a nobody, his invitation might have gone unanswered—but in this case, it took less than three days from the time the call went out for the ox carts and boats to set out in full force as all the wise and virtuous talents flocked to their destination.

For the man who had sent the invitation was one Yao Wenyu.

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Chapter 184:
Discourse

CHAZHOU WAS HIT by an unbroken spell of wet weather in the tenth month, and the rhythmic drumming of rain against the banana leaves outside the windows was audible even with the curtains down. Luo Mu was in his day robe, not his official garb, as he sat in the seat to the right of the guest of honor. He surveyed his surroundings; the tea house was filled to the brim with people. The guests hailed from all corners of the land, and a sizable number wore sandals and rain cloaks made of straw.

It was after midday; the incense lit by the window had already burned out. Hearing movement, Luo Mu straightened up and looked toward the door, where an oilpaper umbrella swayed aside to reveal a figure in a dark blue scholar's robe. His voluminous sleeves rested on his knees, where a cat lounged. Delicate wrist bones peeked from under his cuffs, drawing the eye to his long fingers and making them appear all the more graceful and strong.

Yao Wenyu bowed from his wheelchair and said solemnly, "I apologize for keeping the elders waiting."

The little wheels of his chair rolled over the wooden floorboards as Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu in. Murmurs rose among the assembly. Those who had not removed their straw hats earlier took them off now, one after another. Countless gazes fell upon Yao Wenyu, watching him attentively.

He came to a stop before the round window.

Elder Mei of Qinzhou, smoking his pipe, tapped out the ash and looked at Yao Wenyu. "We have gathered here today to attend the symposium to which our young friend Yuanzhuo here has invited us. It has been a year since we last met, and my young friend has become only more poised."

Tea had been served, and the incense was lit up yet again.

What was called a symposium was simply an extended conversation. The host and guests sat facing each other, politely forbidden to touch upon political affairs or civil issues, only discussing profound and esoteric subjects. This was why Luo Mu was not wearing his official's robe today. This kind of philosophical discussion required its participants to be not only erudite and insightful but also poetically eloquent.

Yao Wenyu, having traversed the world in his search for knowledge, was adept at this art. This was why his singular invitation had garnered hundreds of responses, allowing him to organize this symposium in Chazhou. He had been known as a skilled conversationalist in the past, and his ideas were original and distinctive. And as he did not enter civil service despite his noble origins, he was far more popular than Hai Liangyi among the reclusive scholars who were most averse to politics.

Elder Mei had already been waiting an hour, so after the customary exchange of greetings, he cut to the chase. "I see my young friend has changed."

"This body is not my own; this change does not reflect a change in me," Yao Wenyu answered.

Elder Mei set down his pipe. "I can see it with my own eyes. If you have not changed, why do you not stand up?"

Yao Wenyu put down the Daoist horsetail whisk he had been holding. "Was I standing a year ago when we conversed in Qinzhou?"

"Of course you were," Elder Mei said.

"Then I am still standing now," Yao Wenyu replied.

Luo Mu had once participated in such a dialogue while pursuing his studies in Dengzhou, but that had been merely an informal discussion among fellow students. Kong Ling was also a talented rhetorician, but for some reason, he had not appeared today. The conversation continued, as did the drizzle outside. Everyone listened with rapt attention.

Leaning against the door, Qiao Tianya watched the raindrops splash off the eaves and cast a hazy veil over the mountains in the distance. Yao Wenyu's voice was crystal clear, and his calm and collected answers

seemed to fall like the weiqi stones he placed on the board in his courtyard, one at a time, pattering down amid the rain.

"Since a symposium can convene the wise and virtuous, why isn't the Imperial College organizing one?" Li Jianting asked Xue Xiuzhuo as she sat for her lessons.

Xue Xiuzhuo closed the book in his hand and replied with a question: "What sort of people may participate in such a discourse?"

"All the learned men in the world," Li Jianting replied.

"Wrong." Xue Xiuzhuo looked Li Jianting in the eyes. "It's those with full stomachs and no worries in the world."

Xue Xiuzhuo had participated in such symposiums before, although not many times. To court officials like him, Jiang Qingshan, and others, these so-called philosophical symposiums were empty rhetoric. The participants discussed neither state affairs nor civil or agricultural matters. These dialogues were all the rage in the thirteen cities of Juexi, and almost as popular in the eight cities of Qudu. Pan Lin and the other young masters of the noble clans held Yao Wenyu in such high esteem partially because Yao Wenyu rarely touched on politics, signaling his detachment from worldly concerns. But such detachment was built on the prerequisite that he never had to worry about basic necessities like food or clothing. Such conversations had gone extinct in Zhongbo after the reign of Xiande. Was this due to a lack of learned men in Zhongbo? No; it was that there was no longer a person in Zhongbo who wasn't starving.

Li Jianting thought it over. "In that case, why would Yao Wenyu invite all of these people with full stomachs and no worries in the world?"

After a moment's silence, Xue Xiuzhuo turned his gaze to the swaying banana leaves outside the window. The rain sheeted down, just as it had on the day he had played weiqi with Yao Wenyu on Mount Bodhi.

The sky had darkened outside the tea house, but the dialogue had yet to conclude. Elder Mei, being advanced in age, was tired from sitting so

long. He was debating Yao Wenyu on the nature of the changed and the unchanged, and he had already drunk several cups of tea to moisten his dry mouth.

Elder Mei cleared his throat. “The change I speak of is the bodily change before our eyes, and it’s not just that. You have changed; time has changed, and so has the world. You are no longer the same ‘you’ you were before, and certainly not the ‘you’ from one year ago.”

All eyes fell upon Yao Wenyu, waiting for his answer, but he merely bowed to Elder Mei from his wheelchair, letting his sleeves sweep down. “You are absolutely right.”

A flurry of murmurs rose up the moment these words left his mouth. How could the dialogue end here? They had come all the way to Chazhou from every corner of the land to hear these members of the literati debate until a clear victor emerged. Who would have expected Yao Wenyu to simply concede defeat?

“Gone is the glory of the reign of Yongyi. The Zhou empire is on the wane. Between the incursion of foreign enemies in the northeast and the collusion betwixt officials and merchants in the southwest, how many places are there left in this world where one can converse freely about the mysteries of the universe?”

The murmurs swelled into an uproar. An enraged Elder Mei tossed his pipe aside and covered his nose with his sleeve. “Foul! Foul! *Foul!* Heaven preserve us from this unbearable stench! What vulgar words are these?! Since when has Yao Wenyu become Hai Renshi?!”

Tea tables clattered as several people rose to their feet. Luo Mu rose, too, ready to dissuade the others. Yet unexpectedly, Yao Wenyu, still positioned at the window, started laughing. The more he laughed, the louder the sound became. “Look how severely the fields of the commoners in the eight cities are misappropriated. The specter of streets dotted with emaciated corpses has long ceased to be empty talk—I’ve changed, yes, and so has the world. You live within it. How long can you remain unchanged?”

Elder Mei had already gathered himself to leave, but on hearing this, he couldn’t refrain from a rebuttal: “All living creatures will perish without

what keeps them alive.[2] To change or not to change is the natural order of the world. You strayed from the path and fell into the trappings of the secular world. Do you think to emulate Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi and become some virtuous politician?!”

“The one who forced this change on me is none other than you, and this society within which we exist,” Yao Wenyu said.

Elder Mei clutched the table, breathless with indignation. “Letting events take their course is the natural order of things! What did Qi Huilian change? What did Hai Liangyi change? You are following in their footsteps. Yuanzhuo, oh, Yuanzhuo! This is a futile endeavor!”

Yao Wenyu schooled his expression. “You speak of the natural order of things. Then in your mind, this empire shall change as it ought, and this world will descend into anarchy as it must. You may continue to stand by and do nothing if you wish. But I have abandoned that path; I have stepped into this turbulent world.”

Elder Mei stomped his feet in anxiety, yelling like a child, “No, come back! Come back!”

Xue Xiuzhuo subscribed to the philosophy that one must live or die by his principles. This was the creed to which Grand Mentor Qi adhered, as did Secretariat Elder Hai. Among them, Yao Wenyu had been the only one who didn’t—yet his move today betokened a clear break from his past belief in letting nature take its course. This was a declaration to all: Yao Wenyu was no longer a detached scholar. He had become a man of the secular world.

Pelting raindrops fell before Qiao Tianya’s eyes, sending up tiny sprays of water and stirring up ripples in the puddles. A small fish with fine scales leapt out of the turbulent pond, and Kong Ling, sitting nearby, caught it and tossed it back.

Fei Sheng held an umbrella while Kong Ling and Shen Zechuan, both in bamboo hats, fished by the pond.

Kong Ling cast out his line again. “After today, men with lofty aspirations ought to flock to Cizhou.”

Shen Zechuan adjusted his grip on the fishing rod. “If men with lofty aspirations were so easy to obtain, how would I have let this learned gentleman slip through my fingers?”

Kong Ling laughed and avoided answering by saying, “This move of Yuanzhuo’s is both a change of path and a new undertaking. He has declared to the world that Secretariat Elder Hai’s legacy lives on in Cizhou. He is no longer the same man he was before.”

“Shenwei has his brush and ink at the ready. Whether Yuanzhuo can redeem his reputation in the hearts of the world’s scholars will hinge on one clerk’s lyrical expression.”

Yao Wenyu had been disavowed by the students during the Imperial College riots on account of his noble birth, but he had now embarked on a different path from that of Elder Mei and his ilk. With the help of Gao Zhongxiong’s persuasive penmanship, his shattered legs might become a definitive statement of will and ambition. Questions would no doubt follow. Why had Yao Wenyu come to Cizhou? If it was because he was guilty of some crime, why did the imperial court send no one to arrest him? Anyone who pursued this line of inquiry would see that Zhongbo had been irrevocably fractured.

“The spring imperial examinations were canceled due to the passing of the Tianchen Emperor,” Shen Zechuan continued. “In short order, Secretariat Elder Hai remonstrated the court with his death, and the Imperial College students attacked the officials of common households. Many officials handed in their resignations during this time, yet Qudu still has to maintain stability between three opposing parties this winter.”

He swung his fishing rod and went on. “Xue Xiuzhuo has half a foot in the Grand Secretariat by virtue of his control over the heir apparent. For this reason alone, the empress dowager must suppress the pragmatist faction he leads; she cannot afford to let him become a minister with the genuine powers of a regent. But if that’s so, when will he be able to fulfill his promises to the Imperial College? He and Yuanzhuo are old acquaintances

and fellow students under the same teacher. Now that Yuanzhuo has openly joined my camp, people will naturally conclude there is more to this schism than meets the eye. What's more, the transgressions of the Li Clan have been long known to all, and men with ambition, seeing that King Yi of Fanzhou has yet to be taken down, are popping up one after another. Even if Xue Xiuzhuo wants to strike back at us, his hands are tied. No matter how you look at it, all he can do this winter is hunker down and take a beating."

"The noble clans have created quite a mess." Kong Ling shook his head as he adjusted his hold on the fishing rod. "The empress dowager refuses to release her grip on power, and everyone in the Grand Secretariat has lost heart. Meanwhile, Xue Xiuzhuo's own authority remains tenuous. While these three remain locked in a stalemate, the eight cities' misappropriation of commoners' fields will remain unresolved. The longer this drags on, the more advantageous it will be for the governor."

Gao Zhongxiong's essays entered circulation a few days later, just as planned. The tailwind Hai Liangyi's passing had left behind had not died down at all. As long as the message was sincere, it could evoke a collective lament. The precise contents of Yao Wenyu's statements in Chazhou were unimportant; the crucial thing was that even ignorant students who couldn't tell rice from wheat now had to face facts.

Those facts: In just six months, Qudu had lost any ability it once had to maintain the stability of its empire. The man Yao Wenyu had aligned himself with was Shen Zechuan, a supposed criminal subject who had rebelled and fled Qudu with the alleged regicide Xiao Chiye. Yet this pair had not only escaped execution but were now a rising power in the northeast.

The empress dowager couldn't force the Qidong Garrison Troops to move, so Han Cheng once again emerged from obscurity and requested to dispatch the Eight Great Battalions to exterminate Shen Zechuan, far away in Cizhou. The Ministry of War, however, declined to approve it, on the grounds that Qudu had no generals to send. The conversation was an unpleasant one, and with the end of the year closing in, the relationship among the three sides grew increasingly fraught.

Once snow began to fall in earnest, the number of migrants seeking asylum in Cizhou and Chazhou surged once again. At the same time Tantai Hu was recruiting soldiers for the garrison troops in Dunzhou, the Embroidered Uniform Guard under Shen Zechuan was also enlisting new members. Shen Zechuan planned to let Haerigu's men train with the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Before Shen Zechuan realized it, the twelfth month was upon them. As he hurried to ready his New Year's gifts, a winter storm brought an unprecedented snowfall down on Libei.

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Chapter 185:
Hongyan

HEAVEN AND EARTH were a vast expanse of white. Frigid wind scoured the fields and rustled through drifts of salt-like snow. Several roads had collapsed, making it practically impossible for grain wagons to enter the war zone. Xiao Chiye had left Snowcrest at Border Camp and led his men to dig out the roads for the past two days.

Wu Ziyu pulled his collar tight against the wind, covering his mouth and nose. He rubbed his frozen hands together, his voice muffled when he spoke. “Damn it. All I did was take a nap, and the path is blocked up again with snow. When will it end?”

Chen Yang never touched wine on duty as a rule, but even he had broken in this cold and now gulped On Horseback until his stomach burned. “The farther we go northeast, the colder it gets. Thank heavens the prefectural governor sent the winter coats before the tenth month—otherwise, how many of us would be left?”

“It’s freezing out.” Gu Jin squatted to rest and shook his head. “And this armor weighs a ton. The battle steeds can’t handle it for long.”

The horses of Libei were not as tolerant of the cold as Biansha’s hardy ponies. Every winter, it was an uphill task preparing fodder for the stables; the horses had it harder than the humans.

“Keep digging,” Xiao Chiye said. “We have to make it to the front lines by tonight.”

The white puff of air Xiao Chiye exhaled was snatched away instantly; the wind was so strong it sent his cloak flapping. Ahead of them, there was no end to the snow, and the blocked road north of Third Sand Camp was a dead end; his only option was to lead his supply squad on a long detour from the Liuyang Camps. Second Sand Camp had run out of supplies and was now relying on First Sand Camp to replenish its stocks. These two camps bore the brunt of the frontline combat, and their equipment saw the most wear and tear. To this end, his father had

transferred a group of craftsmen to the camps in the eleventh month, but with more than fifty thousand men in total, a staggering amount of raw materials was needed. It was up to Xiao Chiye to maintain an uninterrupted flow of iron, wood, leather, and other necessities to both camps.

Despite this, the one in the most challenging position was Zhao Hui, who was stationed at Base Camp, just west of Tudalung Banner. Heavy snow had persisted for several days, and the path, which had already caved in once, was no longer usable; the wooden planks Xiao Chiye had used to repair it couldn't withstand the weight of the snow, and the grain wagons were heavier still. Xiao Chiye didn't dare bring them through without careful consideration. Zhao Hui would have to wait a few more days as he set off from the frontline camps, grain wagons in tow, and skirted around Tudalung Banner to get to him.

Gu Jin huffed warm air into his palms and stood back up. "Keep digging!"

The supply squad hadn't had a day's rest in the past three months. Yet none of the soldiers groused because Xiao Chiye had not gotten a break either. They had been practically running circles all over Libei's territory. By now, Xiao Chiye could point out the quickest route from one camp to another with his eyes closed. He was blessed with astonishing stamina and energy, and the busy transport of supplies had not delayed the recovery of his right arm. Even before they had set off from Border Camp, he was drawing the Conqueror Bow, and the ear-piercing *twang* of the bowstring had left the Libei Armored Cavalry dumbstruck.

Xiao Chiye arrived on the front lines in the dead of night, whereupon he met Xiao Fangxu, whose forces had just withdrawn from the battlefield. Father and son both made for a rather sorry sight as they reunited before the dimly illuminated tent.

Xiao Fangxu took off his helmet. It was such a cold day, yet he was drenched in sweat from battle. He accepted a hot towel to wipe his face, then nodded to Xiao Chiye before ducking to enter the tent. Both commanding generals, Zuo Qianqiu and Jiang Sheng, were waiting inside, along with the deputy generals and brigade commanders from First and Second Sand Camps. Everyone looked exhausted.

“It’s too damn bizarre.” Xiao Fangxu tossed the towel on the table. “Those ponies are so stocky their asses are almost dragging on the ground. How can they run so fast in this snow?”

“We can’t retreat.” Zuo Qianqiu stood before the map and pointed to the southeastern corner of Tudalung Banner. “If we pull the line back any further, this area will fall into enemy hands. It’ll cut off Zhao Hui’s remaining supply route. If Hassen drags out the battle over the winter, he’ll wear Zhao Hui down in Tudalung Banner.”

Spring came late in Libei. The snow on the ground now wouldn’t melt until the third month next year at the earliest. Even if Zhao Hui had enough food stockpiled at Base Camp, the army would deplete and wear down their equipment. There were few craftsmen to repair it at Base Camp.

“According to the reports we’ve been getting,” Jiang Sheng said as he kicked off his boots and poured out melted snow, “Hassen’s been giving Zhao Hui’s troops the slip. He knows the camp can’t be resupplied in this weather, so he’s hoping to tire Zhao Hui out while he can.”

Xiao Chiye sat in the corner and ate his flatbread with milk tea. Despite wolfing down his food, he didn’t miss a word.

After staring at the map in silence for a moment, Xiao Fangxu spoke. “Hassen’s planning to ambush him.”

Xiao Chiye thought so too.

Hassen wanted Zhao Hui exhausted. The Libei Armored Cavalry consumed too much equipment, and their battle steeds were no match for the Biansha ponies in winter. First Sand Camp could only render minimal assistance to Zhao Hui now that the roads were blocked, and Base Camp had no reinforcements to back them. When Guo Weili had been stationed there, the Liuyang Camps, led by Zhao Hui, had served as his reinforcements. But now that Zhao Hui had stepped to the fore, all he had behind him were the troops guarding the Northeast Provisions Trail—and right now even those couldn’t reach him due to the heavy snow.

“Hassen will know the supplies have made it here.” Xiao Fangxu looked back at Xiao Chiye. “He’ll make his move in the next two days.”

Any longer than that and Xiao Chiye would proceed north; Hassen would miss his opportunity.

“At first light tomorrow I’ll lead Squad Three to lie in wait over here.” Xiao Fangxu swept a finger over the map. “Qianqiu will stay here to guard the camp, and Lao-Jiang will circle around behind them. We’ll form a net here. At the very least, we have to knock Hassen back a little. This kid isn’t just good at field operations—he’s a master at both offense and defense. We can’t let him find cover; we need to box him in on the snowfield.”

The armored cavalry was a wall in motion. If they could outflank him, Hassen would run up against this wall. Restricting the Biansha Horsemen’s speed was equivalent to chopping off their legs. Even off their horses, the Libei Armored Cavalry remained an obstacle that would prove tough for the Biansha scimitars and pike daggers to break through.

After the meeting ended, Xiao Chiye lingered in the tent.

Zuo Qianqiu stepped over and patted Xiao Chiye’s right arm. “Have your wounds healed?”

Xiao Chiye lifted his arm and moved it around to demonstrate. “No problem holding a blade or drawing a bow.”

“We’ll have to thank Lanzhou during the Spring Festival,” Zuo Qianqiu said with a laugh. “The winter coats he sent are all real cotton. The last few years, the coats Qudu sent were all padded with paper scraps. Your sister-in-law wrote to say she would personally cook a meal to thank him when he comes.”

Xiao Chiye darted a glance at Xiao Fangxu, then replied humbly, “He’s only doing what he ought; it’s nothing deserving of that kind of thanks from my sister-in-law. A few days ago, he sent a letter saying his New Year’s gifts had been prepared; the end of the year will be here before we know it.”

Xiao Fangxu sprinkled salt into his bowl as though he hadn’t heard a word of their conversation.

“Your father was praising him for days after we got the coats,” Zuo Qianqiu went on. “During the Spring Festival, let’s—”

“Nope. I never praised him,” Xiao Fangxu said flatly.

“Right.” Zuo Qianqiu threw Xiao Chiye a meaningful glance. “I was the one showering him with praise.”

“Why aren’t you going to bed yet?” Xiao Fangxu asked Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye watched him finish his milk tea before responding. “Will you be wearing your heavy armor when you head out to lay the ambush tomorrow?”

“How am I supposed to intercept Hassen without it?” Xiao Fangxu set his bowl aside. “He’s more formidable on the field than Amur.”

“Then take off your helmet,” Xiao Chiye said. “There could be Scorpions hidden among Hassen’s troops.”

“Without our helmets, how can we be considered an iron wall? If we want to trap them in the snow, this is the only way to fight.” Xiao Fangxu rubbed his hands to warm them and thought for a while. “According to your report, there are very few Scorpions—not enough to pose a serious threat to the Libei Armored Cavalry right now. Even if there are Scorpions among Hassen’s troops, there can only be a scattering of them.”

“The armored cavalry is too heavy.” Xiao Chiye looked up at Xiao Fangxu. “We have to make changes after spring next year. If we want to push the Biansha Horsemen back east, we should be prepared for all possibilities.”

“You want to strip the cavalry of its armor to lighten its weight.” Xiao Fangxu finally turned to look at him. “But you still can’t match the speed of the Biansha Horsemen like that.”

Xiao Chiye was silent as he locked eyes with Xiao Fangxu.

“The troops you trained in Qudu were all infantrymen, and your experience battling on horseback comes from Lu Guangbai. But Libei doesn’t have the natural geographical advantage of the Bianjun Commandery. If we want a wall, we can only rely on our own heavy armor.” Xiao Fangxu looked away and tossed a few pieces of coal into the

brazier. “Your elder brother lightened the Libei Armored Cavalry, but he still couldn’t break through that line in the east.”

Xiao Fangxu gazed into the brazier. “Amur simply reacts too fast. He’s gotten a clear handle on the Libei Armored Cavalry over the past few decades. An addition here or subtraction there won’t beat a man like that. The armored cavalry needs to transform like never before.”

This was the fundamental predicament of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amur had succeeded in training his Scorpion unit, and if the results of their last confrontation were anything to go by, their hammers would be the Libei Armored Cavalry’s bane. Removing their helmets was no true solution—it would merely signal that cracks had begun to show in the Libei Armored Cavalry’s heavy armor. The problem put Xiao Fangxu at a loss. Despite the liability, their heavy armor was also the only advantage the Libei Armored Cavalry had left; he had no choice but to continue taking the risk. If they discarded this, they could no longer hold their own against even the ordinary Biansha Horsemen.

Amur was a true strategic genius, and his son Hassen was also remarkable. Biansha was entering what appeared to be a golden age. By next winter at the latest, Xiao Fangxu imagined Amur would be able to finally unite the Twelve Tribes. When that time came, the entire eastern side of Zhou would become a war zone.

This was the primary reason Qi Zhuyin had been so steadfast in her refusal to lead her army north or fall afoul of Libei. She, too, had glimpsed this monstrous beast from where she stood in Qidong. She could not afford to quarrel with Libei over strife in Qudu, for they would inevitably stand on the same battlefield in the future—their enemy had grown so powerful it chilled their hearts.

What should they do?

As he lay on his cot that night, Xiao Chiye pillowed his head on his arms and contemplated this question in the dark.

Libei possessed the best military craftsmen in the world—a staggering number of them—yet they had no recourse against Amur. It was a kind of humiliation.

Even Amur wasn’t invincible.

The Biansha Horsemen had their weaknesses too—but these weaknesses were obscured by their unbelievable speed. If Libei hoped to turn the tide, they had to remove this advantage. Yet it was at this moment that Xiao Chiye was struck by his own unfamiliarity with their enemy. He had crossed swords with the Biansha Horsemen too few times, and all his dreamed-up countermeasures were merely armchair strategies. He would never devise real tactics while viewing his foes through a hazy mist.

Xiao Chiye couldn’t sleep; he rose to pull on his coat. When he stepped out of his tent, he spied Xiao Fangxu sitting a little distance away, conversing with some of the soldiers. Noticing his son’s presence, he patted the space beside him and handed Xiao Chiye a bowl of milk tea as he sat.

“It’s taboo to stay up late when you have to ride for war in the morning.” Xiao Chiye sipped the warm milk tea.

“When I was your age, I could go without sleep for three days and still be bursting with energy.” Xiao Fangxu’s coat was old and worn, its edges frayed almost to nothing. It had been mended over and over by Lu Yizhi, but even so, he refused to switch to a new one. This one had been sewn by his wife.

Xiao Chiye gulped down the tea and frowned. “That was donkey’s years ago.”

Father and son sat before the crackling fire, shoulder to shoulder, in companionable silence.

“Realized how exhausting this is yet?” Xiao Fangxu eventually asked.

Xiao Chiye did not respond.

Xiao Fangxu looked at his youngest son. After a moment, he said, “When you were a boy, you wanted to fly. You fought to the death to succeed with Meng. You’re doing the same thing now to win.”

“And whose bad habit is this?” Xiao Chiye heaved a sigh.

Xiao Fangxu laughed. “Not mine. Your mother’s.”

Xiao Chiye rubbed a finger along the rim of his bowl and paused. “You lost to Amur at twenty-three; I lost to Hassen at twenty-three.”

“It took me seven years to collect on that debt.” The firelight accentuated Xiao Fangxu’s bold features, making him appear even more handsome, and far more dignified and awe-inspiring, than Xiao Chiye. “Now you understand how that feels. After I lost to him, I couldn’t find my way forward. I thought I didn’t have the talent to be a commander. I’d seen plenty of outstanding commanding generals at Luoxia Pass, many of whom were real geniuses. I suppose you’ve no idea about any of this, but”—the corner of Xiao Fangxu’s mouth curled up in a smile—“Qi Shiyu was the one in the limelight back then. He turned Qidong into a force to behold. The grand marshal of the five commanderies seemed impossibly strong. When I looked at him, and looked at others, I thought I didn’t have what it takes. There was no way I could stand on the same battlefield as them.”

The fire flickered, and a warring scene of glinting spears and armored horses seemed to manifest in the shadows at the edges of its glow. The banners snapped in the wind as if they’d be torn apart, but here it was peaceful, as though this little campfire was the most tranquil corner of the world.

Xiao Fangxu spread out his hand and said, eyes downcast, “I lost my first horse in that battle. But the Biansha Horsemen didn’t leave me time to wallow—the war dragged me out of my slump. I couldn’t wait for someone else to step in, nor feel sorry for myself. When I stood at the front, I realized I didn’t want to lose at all. I wanted to win.”

Win.

This single, wild ambition had sustained Xiao Fangxu through all the decades he’d fought. It was the source of his endless motivation and ultimate glory. In those seven years, he never dared to stop for a moment. Every day he was looking out toward the Hongyan Mountains in the distance. He had come to know himself, and it had yielded a swift and resolute transformation. He had overcome every obstacle, even at the expense of offending his former commanding general, to build a stable at Luoxia Pass. This alone had taken him three whole years. By the time it was completed to his satisfaction, he was twenty-eight years old.

Xiao Fangxu scrutinized the lines crossing his palm. “You returned to Libei and focused your attention on the armored cavalry and the Imperial Army as *armies*, but you never thought to look at the commanding generals. Guo Weili hurt Gu Jin and sparked a feud between the two of you, but Guo Weili’s accomplishments on the battlefield are legitimate. He’s been your elder brother’s vanguard at Base Camp, and his defense of Tudalung Banner has been impregnable. Jiang Sheng is a veteran. He’s rarely stood out, but his Second Sand Camp is the pivot point that holds the lines together. He is the foundation that supports us all, whether up north or down south. A-Ye, what you possess is not just an army, but the experience countless soldiers and officers have amassed. You went to Zhongbo all those years ago to learn from Lu Guangbai, but now that you’re back in Libei, you’re unwilling to learn anything new. Standing before you are the men more familiar with the battlefields of Libei than anyone living. You’ve wasted too much time.”

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip on the bowl.

“You want this position.” Xiao Fangxu clenched his hand into a fist, and said as if asking both Xiao Chiye and himself, “But are you truly worthy of it?”

Before Xiao Chiye ever set foot back in Libei, he had already been rejected by its commanding generals. The feeling this gave him was difficult to describe; he had indeed been hurt by it. After parting ways with Guo Weili at Third Sand Camp, he got into no more disputes with these men, but that was also the point at which they’d gone their separate ways. Xiao Chiye had been back so long, yet the Imperial Army remained the Imperial Army. When he stood within the commander’s tent, the divide between him and the rest of the generals was glaring. He didn’t need these people to be the balm for his wounds. He and the others maintained an appearance of unity, but they were divided at heart, unable to reconcile their differences.

The tea on the fire had begun to bubble over. Xiao Chiye felt he was like the wolf stalking at the edge of the pack. He seemed to have returned home, but in truth, he was still standing as far outside as ever. He watched

these people fight with all their might but saw no place for himself among them.

Xiao Fangxu shifted his gaze back to Xiao Chiye. “You don’t need seven years to defeat Hassen. But you must learn to be more tolerant.”

Xiao Fangxu left camp early the next morning. The snow was falling even more heavily than yesterday. If they didn’t have a helmet acting as a shield, those outside would be instantly blinded. Before putting on his own helmet, Xiao Fangxu whistled for his son. Xiao Chiye came to stand beside his father’s horse, and he tousled Xiao Chiye’s hair.

“It’s too dangerous to set out on snowy nights. Wait for dawn tomorrow before heading north.” As Xiao Fangxu spoke, he put on his helmet, instantly muffling his voice. “We’ll discuss the detailed route when I return.”

“Come back before midnight,” Xiao Chiye said. “The snow’s too heavy. Any later, and you’ll lose your way.”

“That’ll depend on the situation.” Xiao Fangxu tugged on the reins. “I’m off.”

Xiao Chiye watched as Xiao Fangxu led his troops out of the camp. Those armored hooves winding north resembled a wandering dragon, the beast swallowed up by the snow and fog in the blink of an eye. He stood a while longer, then shuffled back into his tent to catch up on his sleep.

He slept deeply and awoke to the sound of hooves on the gravel outside. He was in low spirits, and it took him a few groggy moments to realize it was already dark. He sat up and reached for his clothes. When he stepped out, soldiers were all over the camp. Chen Yang and Gu Jin, who should have been on duty at the entrance of his tent, were both missing.

Xiao Chiye turned and grabbed hold of the first soldier that passed. “What’s going on?”

“Second Sand Camp met with an ambush!” The soldier was pulling on his armor as fast as he could and bowed absently to Xiao Chiye. “We’re heading south now to provide reinforcements!”

Xiao Chiye quickly made his way to the main tent. When he lifted the flap, he almost ran into a fully dressed Zuo Qianqiu about to step out. Xiao Chiye asked, “Jiang Sheng hasn’t returned?”

Zuo Qianqiu didn’t break stride as he answered, face grave, “No—he was likely stalled somewhere. This was a plan to lure us away from the camp. Hassen’s presence at Tudalung Banner was a decoy; his real objective was to ambush Second Sand Camp.”

Snow had blocked the roads connecting Second and Third Sand Camp. Jiang Sheng had led his men out to lay in ambush with Xiao Fangxu, leaving few troops to defend the camp. First Sand Camp was the only one that could come to their aid.

“A-Ye,” Zuo Qianqiu said as he swung astride his horse, “you have to hold down the fort here; there are provisions in the camp.”

“I don’t have the authority to mobilize troops,” Xiao Chiye said.

“You can’t lead the supply squad north.” Zuo Qianqiu reined the horse around. “Stay here and wait for your father to come back!” Almost before the words were out of his mouth, his horse had galloped off.

Xiao Chiye took a few steps back to make way for the cavalry behind him. He scanned the scene of chaos and spotted Chen Yang amid the scrambling soldiers.

“Gu Jin rode north to inform His Lordship of the situation,” Chen Yang hurried over to Xiao Chiye’s side. “It’s snowing too hard; even Meng can’t fly in this weather. Gu Jin is the only one who can find his way through the snow at night.”

“When did he leave?” Xiao Chiye asked.

“An hour ago.” Chen Yang estimated the time. “He won’t be back before daybreak.”

Xiao Chiye froze. “It’s already past midnight?”

“Long past.” Chen Yang glanced worriedly at Xiao Chiye. “Their tracks will have been covered by the snow. Squad Three is probably still in the snowfields, but Jiang Sheng is there too. Master, His Lordship has many more men out there than Hassen; he’s sure to make it back before dawn.”

Anxiety ate at Xiao Chiye—a restlessness he couldn't vent. He hadn't the authority to mobilize troops, and even if he did, the manpower left in First Sand Camp wasn't sufficient to launch any kind of expedition north. All he could do was wait.

Hassen had wanted to lure them away from their base—but what did he hope to achieve with a sneak attack on Second Sand Camp?

Xiao Chiye stared at the map, letting his finger trace the line Xiao Fangxu had drawn. That initial sense of unease had only grown stronger, gnawing at him. He felt as if he was still standing in Tudalung Banner on that stormy night, facing Hassen across the curtain of rain.

Second Sand Camp's food was still in First Sand Camp. Xiao Chiye had just arrived last night; Jiang Sheng hadn't managed to transfer the provisions yet. The main route south from Second Sand Camp had been obstructed by the snow, so raiding Second Sand Camp would neither garner them food nor pose a threat to the Third Sand Camp.

Then why?

Xiao Chiye looked down at the map, at those intricate and complicated routes, and worried at the problem.

Time passed too slowly. Xiao Chiye asked for the time again and again in the main tent. He paced back and forth before the map and rubbed away those haphazard lines. Gradually, he stopped tracing Xiao Fangxu's path and instead put himself in Hassen's shoes.

Hassen was an accomplished hunter familiar with the roads of Libei—this had been evident even in Tudalung Banner. He had been wearing Zhao Hui down, and the blizzard became his cover, allowing him to move in and out of the snowfields with ease.

Why? Xiao Chiye stopped in his tracks. A chill raced down his spine, a knifelike cold that made his fingers stiffen.

Exceptional hunters did not announce their targets. They were patient. Any weaknesses they exposed were bait designed to lure in their enemies. Hassen could move freely through the snowfields, which meant he must know the northern routes like the back of his hand. He knew what

sections of the road were most suitable for an ambush. For the six months Hassen had been on the battlefield in the north, he had spent every day dealing with the Libei Armored Cavalry. He had been practicing all this time; he knew how Xiao Fangxu thought, where he would go.

It was a trap. Hassen had trapped Xiao Fangxu the same way he had trapped Xiao Chiye. He had never planned to launch a sneak attack on Base Camp in the middle of a snowstorm, and he had no interest in Second Sand Camp. He had led them around in such a big circle, all for the sake of a single target: Xiao Fangxu.

Xiao Chiye flung the tent flap open and ran headfirst into Chen Yang.

Chen Yang staggered back and blurted without any courtesies, “Gu Jin is back!”

Xiao Chiye looked out. Not only was Gu Jin back, even Jiang Sheng had returned. Xiao Chiye briskly strode over and pushed aside the armored cavalry standing in his way. He searched every face, but Xiao Fangxu was not among them.

Jiang Sheng had been badly injured and carried back on a stretcher. The moment Xiao Chiye saw the smashed helmet beside him, the color drained from his face. “Fuck!”

“It’s the Scorpions.” Gu Jin scrubbed at his face with a corner of his hem and said hoarsely, “Master, they had our armor—they had our tokens on them. They disguised themselves as the Libei Armored Cavalry and waited at the old relay station in Tudalung Banner. They tricked us!”

“Where is my father?” Xiao Chiye grabbed Gu Jin’s collar and bit out each word of the question.

“Ambushed.” Half of Jiang Sheng’s face was covered in blood. He could hardly hear himself speak over the ringing in his ears. He gripped the edge of the stretcher and mumbled, barely coherent, “It happened right under our noses. They were too fast…”

Gu Jin’s lips were pressed so tight they were bloodless. Under Xiao Chiye’s gaze, he said with difficulty, “I didn’t find him, Master.”

Xiao Chiye shoved Gu Jin aside. He whistled before he remembered he'd left Snowcrest behind. Within a few strides, he was at the stable, where he led a horse out and mounted.

Wu Ziyu threw himself in front of the horse. "Supreme Commander, you don't have the authority to mobilize troops. You'll be court-martialed for going north without orders! We have to send a message to Second Sand Camp and report—"

Xiao Chiye didn't even look at him. He cracked the horsewhip against the beast's flank and shot forth like an arrow.

"Damn it!" Wu Ziyu flung his helmet down and shouted to his left and right, "Quick, report to Second Sand Camp!"

Xiao Chiye galloped through a boundless field of white. The wind tore at his sleeves as he followed the path of hoofprints northwest. The cold was penetrating, and very quickly, his freezing hands turned purple where they gripped the reins. Soon the horse faltered, unable to continue galloping at such speed; Xiao Chiye dismounted and trudged through the heavy snow on foot. Following his keen sense of smell, he tracked his way deep into the snowstorm through the devastated battlefield. It was dark again by the time he found Xiao Fangxu.

He covered his eyes with frozen fingers and rubbed at them furiously, but a sound he couldn't contain escaped his throat. The wind of the Hongyan Mountains snarled in Xiao Chiye's hair. He stood helplessly, until at last he burst into gut-wrenching sobs.

"Give him back…"

Xiao Chiye fell to his knees, torn asunder by grief and anguish as he choked with tears. To that deserted battlefield, he cried, "*Give him back to me!*"

Hassen had taken his father's head.

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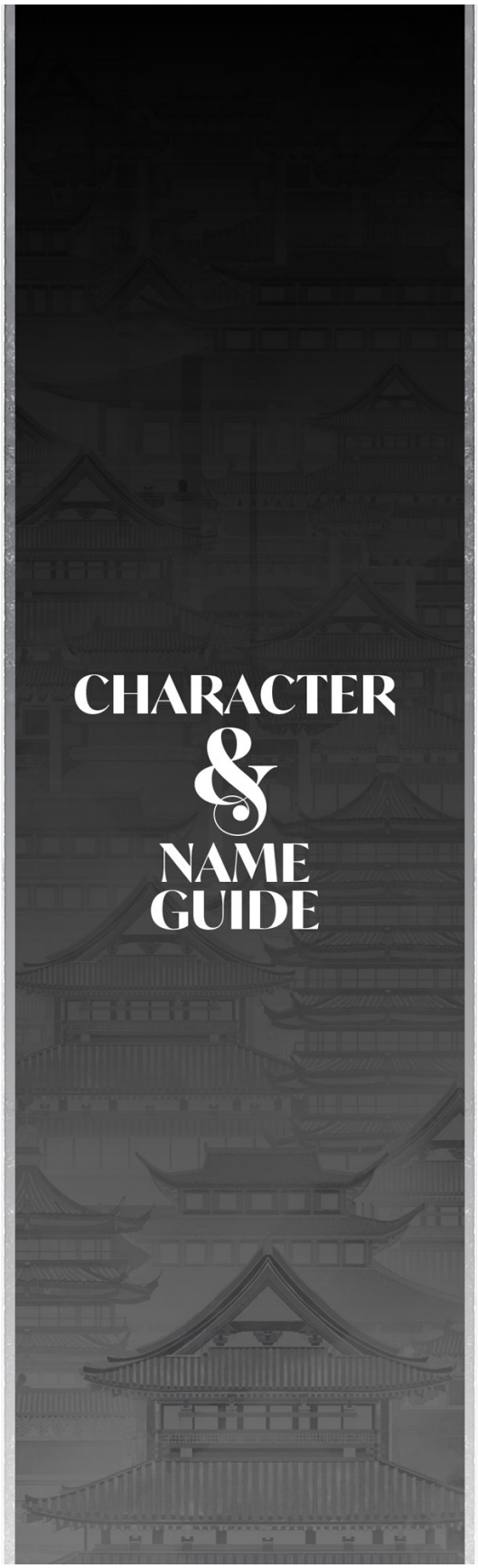
CHARACTER
&
NAME
GUIDE

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Characters

Main Characters

SHEN ZECHUAN

SURNAME SHEN; GIVEN NAME ZECHUAN, "TO NOURISH THE RIVERS"

COURTESY NAME: Lanzhou (/ orchid; boat)

TITLE: Prefectural Governor

WEAPON: Avalanche (/ Yang Shan Xue)

The eighth son of common birth to Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Due to his father's alleged collusion with the enemy during the invasion of Zhongbo that led to the slaughter of thirty thousand soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole, he was sentenced to imprisonment and was obligated to pay his father's debt as the last surviving member of the Shen Clan.

XIAO CHIYE

SURNAME XIAO; GIVEN NAME CHIYE, "TO RIDE ACROSS THE WILD"

COURTESY NAME: Ce'an (/ spur; peace)

TITLE: Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army

WEAPON: Wolfsfang (/ Langli): A single-edged executioner's blade forged by the best craftsman in Qidong.

The second and youngest son of lawful birth to Xiao Fangxu, the Prince of Libei. Sometimes called Xiao Er, or Second Young Master Xiao.

QUDU

CEN YU : Courtesy name Xunyi. The Left Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

CHEN ZHEN : Minister of War.

COMMANDERY PRINCESS ZHAOYUE : Daughter of the Helian Marquis, Fei Shi's older sister.

FEI SHENG ("FLOURISHING"): Son of common birth in the Fei Clan. An assistant commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

FEI SHI : Lawful son of Fei Kun, the Helian Marquis.

FENGQUAN : A junior eunuch, Pan Rugui's "grand-godson" and Mu Ru's younger brother. Promoted to Director of the Seal at the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. Li Jianting's personal eunuch.

FU LINYE : The Right Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

GE QINGQING : Judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard who served under Ji Gang when the latter was still the vice commander. Currently stationed in Juexi to keep a tight watch over the Xi Clan.

GU JIN : Guard to Xiao Chiye. He has excellent hearing.

HAI LIANGYI ("VIRTUOUS AND PROPER"): Courtesy name Renshi. Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and teacher to Yao Wenyu.

HAN CHENG : Chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard after Ji Lei's death.

HAN JIN : Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions.

HUA HEWEI : The empress dowager, widow of the Guangcheng Emperor.

HUA XIANGYI ("RIPPLES OF FRAGRANCE"): The third lady of the Hua Clan, adored niece of the empress dowager. Betrothed to Qi Shiyu.

KONG QIU : Courtesy name Boran. Minister of Justice.

LI JIANHENG : The Tianchen Emperor. As the final survivor of the Li Clan, he ascended the throne after the death of the Xiande Emperor.

LI JIANTING ("SWORD; THUNDER"): Originally named Ling Ting ("clever; pretty"). After the passing of the Tianchen Emperor, she is brought forward as the imperial heir to the throne.

LI JIANYUN : The Xiande Emperor. Son of the Guangcheng Emperor and elder brother to Li Jianheng.

LIANG CUISHAN : A clerk in the Ministry of Revenue. After his audits of the Imperial Army's accounts, he received a series of promotions that led him to work directly under Pan Lin.

PAN LIN : Courtesy name Chengzhi. Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and lawful son of Pan Xiangjie.

PAN XIANGJIE : Minister of Works. Head of the Pan Clan of the Eight Great Clans.

PAN YI : Commandant of Dancheng. The second son of the Pan Clan, born of the first concubine. Pan Lin's younger brother. Husband to Commandery Princess Zhaoyue.

PAN YUAN : The younger brother of Pan Lin and Pan Yi, of common birth.

QI HUILIAN : Grand mentor to the deceased Crown Prince of Yongyi, and later, Shen Zechuan's teacher.

WEI HUAIGU : Minister of Revenue.

XI HONGXUAN : Secretary of the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Personnel. Xi Gu'an's brother and the second son of lawful birth in the Xi Clan.

XUE XIUYI : Xue Xiuzhuo's elder brother of lawful birth.

XUE XIUZHUO : Courtesy name Yanqing. Assistant Minister in the Court of Judicial Review. A capable young official and son of common birth in the Xue Clan.

Juexi

JIANG QINGSHAN ("GREEN HILLS"): Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

YANG CHENG : Assistant Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

LIBEI

CHEN YANG ("MORNING SUN"): Leader of Xiao Chiye's guards.

GUO WEILI : Commanding general of Third Sand Camp.

JIANG SHENG : Commanding general of Second Sand Camp

LU YIZHI : Heir Consort of Libei. Xiao Jiming's wife and Lu Guangbai's sister.

TANTAI HU ("TIGER"): Member of the Imperial Army.

WU ZIYU : The youngest general in Libei; was commanding general of Border Camp until Xiao Chiye took over.

XIAO FANGXU ("RISING SUN"): Prince of Libei. Father to Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming, and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

XIAO JIMING ("APPROACHING BRIGHTNESS"): Heir of Libei and commander of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Xiao Chiye's elder brother; he is married to Lu Yizhi, Lu Guangbai's sister. One of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Iron Horse on River Ice."

XIAO XUN : Grandson-Heir of Libei. Lawful son of Xiao Jiming and Lu Yizhi.

ZHAO HUI ("MORNING SUN"): Xiao Jiming's dependable deputy general.

ZUO QIANQIU : Xiao Chiye's shifu and one of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Thunder on Jade Terraces."

QIDONG

LU GUANGBAI ("EMPTY EXPANSE"): Commanding general of the Bianjun Commandery in Qidong. Brother to Lu Yizhi and one of the current Four Great Generals, known as "Beacon-Smoke and Rising Sand."

LU PINGYAN ("PACIFY BEACON SMOKE"): Lu Guangbai's father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the Zhou empire.

QI SHIYU (“TIMELY RAIN”): Qi Zhuyin’s father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

QI WEI : Deputy General to Qi Zhuyin.

QI ZHUYIN (“sound of bamboo”): Grand marshal of the Qidong Garrison Troops. One of the current Four Great Generals, Qi Zhuyin is known as “Windstorm through the Scorching Plains” and commands all five garrisons in the commanderies of Qidong.

ZHONGBO

DING TAO : Young guard to Xiao Chiye. He carries a little notebook everywhere he goes.

GAO ZHONGXIONG : Courtesy name Shenwei. Former student of the Imperial College; currently works for Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

HAERIGU : A Scorpion who defected from Gedal.

JI GANG : Shen Zechuan’s shifu. Once the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he is one of the three adopted sons of Ji Wufan, the former chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

KING YI OF FANZHOU : A commoner who rose in rebellion and proclaimed himself king.

KONG LING : Courtesy name Chengfeng. Chief advisor to Zhou Gui, prefect of Cizhou.

LEI CHANGMING : A bandit chief in Zhongbo. His base is Mount Luo.

LEI JINGZHE : A bandit of Mount Luo. The eldest common son of Lei Changming’s sister and Zhu Jie, the commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops during the reign of Yongyi.

LI XIONG (“BEAR”): A youth who was taken in and raised by Lei Jingzhe.

LIU’ER & DING NIU : Bandits under Lei Jingzhe.

LUO MU : Courtesy name Mengzheng. The prefect of Chazhou. He and Kong Ling were students together.

QIAO TIANYA ("EDGE OF THE WORLD"): Previously named Qiao Songyue. The former judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he now takes Shen Zechuan as his master.

YAN HERU : The youngest young master of the prodigious merchant Yan Clan of Hezhou.

YAO WENYU ("GENTLE JADE"): Courtesy name Yuanzhuo. Hai Liangyi's only acknowledged pupil, said to be an extraordinary talent. After being poisoned by Xue Xiuzhuo, he traveled to Cizhou, where he became Shen Zechuan's strategist.

YU XIAOZAI : Courtesy name Youjing. Previously the Investigating Censor in the Chief Surveillance Bureau, he left Qudu after losing his position and joined Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

ZHOU GUI : The prefect of Cizhou.

BIANSHA

AMUR : The Great Hero hailing from the Liaoying tribe who went on to become Libei's archenemy.

BAYIM : Huhelu's deputy general, transferred to Hassen after Huhelu's death.

HUHELU : From the Changjiu Tribe. Amur's adopted son and a capable general, deceased.

HASSEN : Son of Amur. His mother holds a high status in the Hanma tribe. Has striking red hair.

JIDA : One of the Scorpions.

PAST

BAI CHA ("WHITE TEA"): Shen Zechuan's mother. A dancer from Duanzhou.

FENG YISHENG : One of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou. Adopted father to Zuo Qianqiu.

GUANGCHENG EMPEROR : Father to Li Jianheng and Li Jianyun, husband to Hua Hewei, the current empress dowager. His reign is titled the "Yongyi" years.

HUA PINGTING : Wife of Ji Gang and mother of Ji Mu; Shen Zechuan's shiniang. She was born in the Hua Clan.

JI MU : The only son of Ji Gang and Hua Pingting, and Shen Zechuan's adoptive elder brother.

SHEN WEI ("DEFENSE"): Prince of Jianxing and Shen Zechuan's father. Found guilty of colluding with the Biansha Horsemen to invade Zhongbo, he allegedly self-immolated to evade justice.

SHAO CHENGBI : Former Vice Minister of the Ministry of War.

TANTAI LONG : Tantai Hu's deceased older brother. Was the commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops before his death.

Institutions

THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD

The Embroidered Uniform Guard, sometimes referred to as the Scarlet Cavalry, are the elite bodyguards who report directly to the emperor. They are a non-military secret police and investigative force. The Embroidered Uniform Guard is organized into the Twelve Offices, which include the Carriage Office, Umbrella Office, Elephant-Training Office, and Horse-Training Office, among others. The Xiuchun saber, a single-edged blade, is their signature weapon.

THE IMPERIAL ARMY

The Imperial Army of Qudu was once the Imperial Guard of the eight cities and the impregnable fortress of the imperial palace in Qudu.

However, with the rise to power of the Eight Great Battalions, their duties were reduced significantly, and the Imperial Army became a dumping ground for sons from old military households. They are one of the two major military powers in Qudu.

THE EIGHT GREAT BATTALIONS

Led by a member of the Eight Great Clans, the Eight Great Battalions are one of the two major military powers in Qudu, tasked with patrolling and defending Qudu against external forces. Responsible for defending Qudu, the capital city and heart of the Zhou empire, the Eight Great Battalions hold the empire's life in their hands.

THE EIGHT GREAT CLANS

The Eight Great Clans originated from the Eight Cities of Qudu. One clan holds sway in each city—the Xue Clan of Quancheng, Pan Clan of Dancheng, Xi Clan of Chuncheng, Fei Clan of Chuancheng, Hua Clan of Dicheng, Yao Clan of Jincheng, Han Clan of Wucheng, and Wei Clan of Cuocheng.

THE GRAND SECRETARIAT

The most distinguished and influential body in the central government, it is staffed with Grand Secretaries who are responsible for handling the emperor's paperwork, recommending decisions in response to memorials received from the officials, and drafting and issuing imperial pronouncements.

THE SIX MINISTRIES

The Six Ministries comprise the primary administrative structure of the Zhou empire's central government and include the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of Revenue, and Ministry of War. Coordinated by the Grand Secretary of the

Grand Secretariat, the heads of these ministries report directly to the emperor.

The Six Offices of Scrutiny is an independent agency set up to inspect and supervise the Six Ministries. It includes the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue.

CHIEF SURVEILLANCE BUREAU

Also known as the Censorate. One of the major agencies of the central government, responsible for maintaining disciplinary surveillance, auditing fiscal accounts, checking judicial records, carrying out inspections, impeaching officials for misconduct, recommending new policies and changes in old policies, and other duties involved in regulating government actions.

THE COURT OF JUDICIAL REVIEW

An important central government agency responsible for reviewing reports of judicial proceedings, making recommendations for retrials, and participating in important judicial proceedings at court alongside the Chief Surveillance Bureau and the Ministry of Justice, which are collectively known as the Three Judicial Offices.

THE LIBEI ARMORED CAVALRY

The Libei Armored Cavalry is a heavy cavalry established by Xiao Fangxu to counter external foes at the northern front during the Yongyi era, when the Biansha Horsemen repeatedly assaulted Luoxia Pass. Currently commanded by Xiao Jiming, the Heir of Libei.

THE QIDONG GARRISON TROOPS

Under the command of Qi Zhuyin, the Qidong Commandery Garrison Troops are stationed across five commanderies. They watch over

the Qidong territories in the southern regions of the Zhou empire, which are led by the Qi Clan.

THE BIANSHA HORSEMEN

The Biansha Horsemen are the aggressor forces against the empire of Zhou. The story begins with the aftermath of the war, where the Biansha Horsemen ravaged the six prefectures of Zhongbo and left them piled high with bodies. Also referred to in derogatory form as the “Biansha baldies.”

THE TWENTY-FOUR YAMEN

Collectively refers to the Twelve Directorates, Four Offices, and Eight Services under which eunuchs serve.

Names Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

COURTESY NAMES VS GIVEN NAMES

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one’s crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one’s peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one’s given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more

than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

DIMINUTIVES, NICKNAMES, AND NAME TAGS

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning “little.”

-ER: An affectionate diminutive suffix added to names, literally “son” or “child.” Not to be confused with Xiao Chiye’s nickname, Xiao Er, in which “er” ( ) means “second.”

-LANG: A suffix meaning young man. A term of address often used toward one’s lover or husband.

LAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning “old.”

-ZI: Affectionate suffix meaning “son” or “child.”

-XIONG: A word meaning elder brother. It can be attached as a suffix to address an older male peer.

FAMILY

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

-SHU: A suffix meaning “uncle.” Can be used to address unrelated older men.

MARTIAL ARTS AND TUTELAGE

SHIFU: Teacher or master, usually used when referring to the martial arts.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHISHU: Martial uncle, used to address someone who studied under the same master (or shifu) as one's own master.

SHINIANG: The wife of one's shifu.

XIANSHENG: Teacher of academics.

OTHER

-GONGGONG: Term of address for a eunuch.

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

-JUN: An address meaning "lord"

SHIZI: Title for the heir apparent of a feudal prince.

LAO-ZUZONG: Literally "old ancestor," an intimate and respectful term of address from a junior eunuch to a more senior eunuch.

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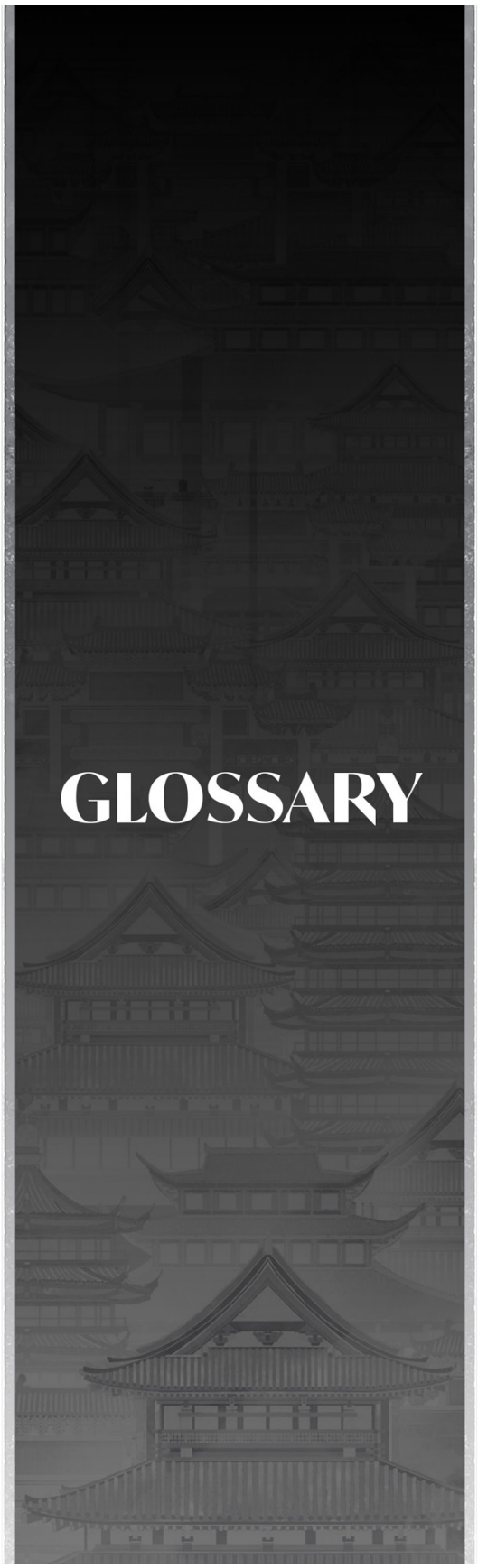
GLOSSARY

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Glossary

CALENDARS: The traditional Chinese calendar is a combination of the lunar and solar calendars. Like the Gregorian calendar, one year also contains twelve months with twenty-nine to thirty days per month, but respective dates do not line up with the Gregorian calendar. In general, the first through third months are considered spring, the fourth through sixth months are summer, the seventh through ninth months are autumn, and the tenth through twelfth months are winter. New Year's Day, which is the first day of the first month on the traditional Chinese calendar, typically falls on a day between late February and early March on the Gregorian calendar.

CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status; hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son could also elevate the mother's status.

HORSETAIL WHISK: Consisting of a long wooden handle with horsehair bound to one end, the horsetail whisk (/ fuchen, "brushing off dust") symbolizes cleanliness and the sweeping away of mortal concerns in Buddhist and Daoist traditions. It is usually carried in the crook of one's arm.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM: The system of examinations in ancient China that qualified someone for official service. It was intended to be a meritocratic system that allowed common civilians to rise up in society as a countering force to the nobility, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

The imperial examination system was split into various levels. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, these were the provincial exam, metropolitan exam, and the palace exam. The top scholars at each examination level were known as the Jieyuan, Huiyuan, and Zhuangyuan respectively, and a scholar who emerged top at all three levels was known as the Sanyuan, or Triple Yuan, scholar.

LAWFUL AND COMMON BIRTH HIERARCHY: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

LONGYOU MERCHANTS: Historically, an influential group of merchants and businessmen. The Longyou Group (　　) was famous during the Ming and Qing dynasties for its operations in the jewelry, book-publishing, and paper-making industries.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his obligations, then he would lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and similar calamities.

NEW YEAR AND SPRING FESTIVAL: The Spring Festival marks the start of the new year on the traditional Chinese calendar. Yuanchun, also known as Yuandan, is the first day of the traditional new year, but new year celebrations usually start on the 23rd day of the twelfth month and last until the Lantern Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the new year. For the common people, this is an annual opportunity to gather with loved ones, indulge in meat that is normally too expensive for their tables, and put on new clothes.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. Referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official, was the traditional path to becoming a court official. Another path, which later gained popularity as a way of combatting corruption and political cliques, was going through the imperial examination.

OFFICIALS OF COMMON BACKGROUNDS: Despite coming from affluent, possibly landowning, families, these officials were said to be from "common backgrounds" because they were the first court officials in their family. This is in direct contrast to the noble officials, who consolidated their power over time by forming a familial network with other officials and using their influence to raise their younger generations to officialdom.

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT:

li **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 500 meters or 1,640 feet.

chi **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 13 inches.

dan **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to approximately 100 liters.

dou **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a dan.

YAMEN: An administrative office or department, or residence of a government official. For example, that of a local district magistrate or prefectural prefect. This is not the same as the Twenty-Four Yamen run by the eunuchs.

YELLOW REGISTER: In the Ming and Qing dynasties, households were classified and recorded into the Huangce ( ) or yellow registers according to their occupations, which remained unchanged from one generation to the next. These records provided information for taxation, as well as corvée and military conscription. Households were mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and trades, with civilians further divided into subcategories like scholars, farmers, or builders. Apart from the “good civilians” or , there also existed a permanent underclass of slaves or , who were born into their class or relegated as punishment for crime.

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About the Author

Tang Jiu Qing is an internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. She started the web serialization of *Ballad of Sword and Wine: Qiang Jin Jiu*, in 2018. Her published works include *Nan Chan* and *Time Limited Hunt*, among others.

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Footnotes

Chapter 160: Hearsay

[1] An address meaning “lord.”

Chapter 184: Discourse

[2] A line from the Tao Te Ching by Chinese philosopher Laozi, considered the founder of Daoism.

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SINS *of* THE FATHER

As Shen Zechuan attempts to consolidate power in Zhongbo with the aid of Yao Wenyu, his greatest stumbling block continues to be his own name. No matter how great his deeds, so long as he bears the stain of the traitor Shen Wei, he remains foiled in his ambitions. If Shen Zechuan is to expand his hold over the region, he must find a way to overcome his past.

Meanwhile, in the north, Xiao Chiye struggles to find his footing in the Libei Armored Cavalry. Their enemy Amur has sent his most powerful general northward, and the cavalry find themselves pressed back time and again by an adversary who seems to anticipate their every move. Xiao Chiye is hungry to step out of his father and brother's shadow and become the commander who carries Libei to victory—but can he prove himself before it's too late?

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